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Under Cover of Lightness: How Mixed-Race Americans Navigated the Racial Codes of
Antebellum America

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the way people of mixed “racial” ancestry—known as mulattoes in the 18th and 19th centuries—navigated life in deeply racially divided society. Even understanding “mulatto strategies” is difficult because it is to study a group shrouded in historical ambiguity by choice. Nonetheless, this paper will seek to identify the beginnings of this group’s history by looking at the two centuries before emancipation, but specifically the six decades prior, known as the antebellum period. As addressed in the paper’s introduction, the term “mulatto” is not commonly used today, and many consider it offensive. Similar terms such as quadroon and octoroon have faced similar fates. While this paper is not seeking to “reclaim” these words, using such terms allows for a specificity when talking not about all Americans of mixed-race, but specifically those of mixed black/white ancestry.

The paper’s main thesis is that in antebellum America, mulattoes often were able to manipulate the racial hierarchies around them to their advantage. How mulattoes fit into these hierarchies depended on the region, as it outlined throughout the paper, with hierarchies and notions of slavery and freedom changing from place to place, with mulattoes seeking to make the most of their circumstances in all instances. In the midst of illustrating this, it was also be shown how colorism played a factor in society, with such tensions stemming from white prejudice, but also emerging in the works of both mulattoes and blacks. Ultimately, the main focus of this paper is not a particular person or place, but a color, and how people’s lives were affected by this color. Though the paper is focused on American mulattoes, another aspect of this paper will be looking at those American mulattoes who emigrated to Liberia. While no longer geographically in America, their story helps illustrate the pervasiveness of American colorism, even in an environment without direct white control.

Introduction

The year is 1997. Mariah Carey is on top of the world, moving towards having a number one single in every year of the 1990s. Up to this point, she had achieved her success primarily through ebullient and infectious songs such as “Vision of Love,” “Dreamlover,” “Fantasy,” and the seasonally omnipresent “All I Want for Christmas is You.” Her newest album *Butterfly*, released in September, would continue the trend, with the single “Honey” also reaching number one on the *Billboard* charts. However, the album’s final song is perhaps her most revealing. Carey, daughter of a black father and white mother, begins “Outside” by saying, “It’s hard to explain/ Inherently it’s just always been strange/ Neither here nor there/ Always somewhat out of place everywhere.”¹ She expands on her alienation later in the song when she says, “God knows/ That you’re standing on your own/ Blind and unguided/ Into a world divided.”² In this song, which she later said was “completely about being biracial” and trying not to feel like “some weird alien,” Carey expressed emotions not often seen in such a commercial setting.³ Though seemingly having everything a person could want, Carey still expressed feelings of estrangement felt by many of mixed white and black ancestry.

Such estrangement and ambiguity are seen in how these people are described by American society. The most common term for people of mixed black and white ancestry was “mulatto,” which derives from the Spanish word for mule. Though a term used for centuries, it has become antiquated, now often replaced by words such as “biracial” and “mixed race.” While not necessarily an unutterable racial slur, the term “mulatto” rarely appears in polite conversation, despite occasionally surfacing in popular culture such as the songs “Oye Como

¹ Mariah Carey, “Outside.” *Butterfly*, Columbia Records, 1997.

² Carey, “Outside.”

³ Mariah Carey, “Mariah Carey Genius Level: The Full Interview on Her Iconic Hits & Songwriting Process.” November 14, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdMQ31DIJg&t=1930s>. Accessed July 14, 2019.

Va” by Santana and “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana. Nevertheless, there is a singularity to the word mulatto that does not encompass all peoples of mixed racial ancestry but refers to people of mixed black and white descent in particular. Similar words that were once commonly used were quadroon (someone one-fourth black and three-fourths white) and octoroon (someone one-eighth black and seven-eighths white). Though all these words have understandably fallen out of style, they will be used at points in this paper. This paper is not necessarily seeking to “reclaim” these words, but rather to use them to illustrate the societies that people of mixed race sought to navigate.

America’s creation and fluid interpretation of mulatto identity dates to the first decades of European settlement and African enslavement, where the “world divided” referenced by Carey first emerged. This paper will look at how mulattoes navigated America’s racial landscape in the two centuries before the Civil War, but most specifically in the antebellum period, where those of mixed white/black ancestry occupied several rungs of society. Whatever level of society they were on, however, this paper’s main assertion is that their placement was intrinsically tied to the prevailing racial hierarchy of their region. Put more succinctly, though many antebellum mulattoes displayed great ingenuity and determination, their accomplishments often happened *because* of racial hierarchies, not in spite of them.

It is generally assumed that America was, and to a large degree still is, governed by the “one drop” policy, where all those with some black ancestry were treated as the same. This is a form of hypodescent, where a majority group assigns mixed children to a minority group. While America did generally govern from this policy, and mulattoes will often be grouped with blacks in this paper to illustrate larger points, there were often differences in their treatment that emerged from racial hierarchies. This paper will also look at some of these mulattoes who

became early emigrants to Liberia, and how some of the color prejudices that benefitted them in America were exported to this new colony in Africa. Whether in America or Liberia, American mulattoes often created deconstructions of the racial identities they encountered, specifically ideals of both “whiteness” and “blackness.” Oftentimes, such deconstructions came in the form of what is known as colorism. Colorism was not a term used in the antebellum period but was coined by author Alice Walker in 1982 to mean “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color.”⁴ Whites generally administered these prejudices, yet they often became absorbed by mulattoes themselves.

Many scholars have examined mulattoes in antebellum America, but relatively few sources have been devoted solely to the topic. Most are focused on either the time period or the ethnicity. Regarding the time period, Ira Berlin's 1974 book *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* is a seminal work in the field that focuses on how free blacks navigated society in the antebellum South, with frequent mentions of mulattoes and how their experience varied among different parts of the South. Later books that expanded on similar themes were Larry Koger's 1985 book *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860* and the first half of Loren Schweninger's 1990 book *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915*. James Oliver Horton's 1993 book *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* is the premier source regarding northern mulattoes in the period, as one of its chapters is devoted to the topic.

As for the ethnicity, the most comprehensive work is Joel Williamson's book *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*. Williamson's work, published in 1980 and revised in 1995, analyzes the history of mulattoes from the colonial period to 1915, and

⁴ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 290.

his work, along with Berlin's, is the most frequently cited among later sources on the topic. This thesis, while by no means definitive, will seek to add to the scholarship by having a more encompassing view of antebellum American mulattoes, looking at both the North and the South, as well as how many similar patterns emerged among those who emigrated to Liberia

Miscegenation

Any discussion of antebellum American mulattoes must look at the source of their biological origin, miscegenation. Miscegenation, the mixing of different races, is a term, like mulatto, that is not uttered in polite society today, though the concept, however one defines it, is crucial to understanding the origins of mulattoes' place in society. The term itself did not appear until 1864, when used by Democrats attempting to discredit Abraham Lincoln's reelection campaign. Yet the sexual mixing of blacks and whites in America began long before this, occurring not long after enslaved Africans first arrived in America in 1619.

Social Impact of Miscegenation

Contrary to popular belief, interracial mixing initially occurred in a lower-class context, between slaves and indentured servants, as both groups were in frequent contact.¹ Beginning with Maryland and Virginia, laws emerged in the 1660s against miscegenation, likely out of fear of too much intermingling between the lower classes. The 1676 outbreak of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, which involved lower-class blacks and lower-class whites uniting, presumably confirmed some of the lawmakers' fears regarding the social, let alone conjugal, mixing of the two races. Such confirmations led to Virginia's 1691 decree that "whatsoever English or other white man or woman being free shall intermarry with a negroe, mulatto, or Indian man or woman bond or free shall within three months after such marriage be banished and removed from this

¹ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 7.

dominion forever.”² Ultimately, though, this act and similar acts elsewhere would not always be enforced.

The reason such laws were not always enforced is due to class, as the most common and insidious version of miscegenation involved the upper class. The sexual union of white male slave owners and black female slaves was the South’s worst kept secret for centuries, as it inherently threatened the racial divide. To modern observers, such unions are a well-acknowledged fact, even celebrated in songs such as “Brown Sugar” by the Rolling Stones. The nature of these unions differed from situation to situation, yet all were inherently imbalanced relationships based on an unequal and perverted power structure. This directly relates to the fate of American mulattoes because one of the early Virginia statutes against interracial mixing stated in 1662 that, “all children borne in this country shalbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.”³ Most of the other colonies passed similar laws, enacting a custom known as *partus sequitur ventrem*, where mixed children took the status of their mother. As a result, many mixed children born of master/slave unions were enslaved from the proverbial cradle to grave.

While lifelong enslavement was the fate of many of these children, the family dynamics they inhabited varied from situation to situation. In most cases, though, there was a taboo nature regarding the mere existence of such children. While they were recorded several decades later, many former slave narratives illustrate this. As Elisha Doc Gary from Georgia succinctly stated,

² “April 1691-Act XVI.” *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, From the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619. Volume III*, ed. William Waller Hening (Philadelphia: Thomas DeSilver, 1823), 87.

³ “December 1662-ACT XII,” in *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, From the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619. Volume II*, ed. William Waller Hening (Philadelphia: Thomas DeSilver, 1823), 170.

“I was one of dem shady babies.”⁴ Consequently, many slave owners sought to “remove the evidence,” so to speak, by selling their mixed children. Savilla Burrell from North Carolina recalled that her master had some mulatto children who were ultimately sold due to both increasing neighborhood gossip and the ire of his wife.⁵ Regardless of both such taboos and the likely resentment from their wife, some slave owners embraced and nurtured their mixed illegitimate children. Mary Reynolds from Louisiana once heard such children brag to their white half-siblings that “We ain’t no niggers, ’cause we got the same daddy you has, and he comes to see us near every day and fetches us clothes and things from town.”⁶ Conversely, Dora Franks from Mississippi did not taunt because of her light skin, but was taunted because of it, as the black children “used to chase me round and holler at me, ‘Old yellow nigger.’”⁷ Though the situations all differed, it is clear that such arrangements rarely occurred without causing discomfort.

Without a doubt, those who received the most discomfort from such situations were the enslaved women forced to submit to the sexual whims of their enslavers. Unfortunately, their voices are often silent in accounts of these arrangements. The contemporaneous account that got the most circulation was published near the end of the antebellum period, Harriet Jacobs’ 1861 autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Before she escaped from bondage in North Carolina, Jacobs was subjected to repeated harassment and abuse from her master, and at one point carried on a relationship with another white male. While not proud of this relationship, she

⁴ Elisha Doc Gary, Narrative of Elisha Doc Gary, in *Memoirs of the Enslaved: Voices from the Slave Narratives*, ed. Spencer R. Crew, Lonnie G. Bunch III, and Clement A. Price (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 95.

⁵ Savilla Burrell, Narrative of Savilla Burrell, in *Memoirs of the Enslaved: Voices from the Slave Narratives*, ed. Spencer R. Crew, Lonnie G. Bunch III, and Clement A. Price (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 143.

⁶ Mary Reynolds, Narrative of Mary Reynolds, in *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, ed. B.A. Botkin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1945), 122.

⁷ Dora Franks, Narrative of Dora Franks, interviewed by Mrs. Richard Kolb, in *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives*, ed. Norman R. Yetman (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000), 127.

related that “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.”⁸ Unfortunately, most women in such situations were forced to submit to compulsion or risk the consequences.

In a society with such rigid racial and sexual hierarchies, resisting an enslaver's advances could be deadly. Rev. Young Winston Davis from Florida recalled that, “some were beaten almost to death because they refused.”⁹ Minnie Fulkes from Tennessee gave a more graphic example, describing her mother being tied to a barn and beaten naked until she bled profusely, simply for refusing to be the master’s wife.¹⁰ While many women tried to resist, few succeeded, or succeeded without repercussions. The most famous example was an enslaved woman from Missouri named Celia, who killed her master Robert Newsom in 1855 when he attempted to rape her once again. Her trial resulted in a death sentence, an outcome that was likely inevitable due to the hierarchies around Celia but became a *fait accompli* when the court did not allow her lawyer to establish an argument of self-defense.¹¹

Another contingent disturbed by such arrangements, though almost never an ally of the enslaved women being taken advantage of, were the white wives of slave owners. The most well-circulated account of their feelings was from Mary Boykin Chestnut, who lamented in March 1861, on the eve of the Civil War, that “every lady tells you who is the father of all the Mulatto children in everybody's household, but those in her own, she seems to think drop from

⁸ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861), 84.

⁹ Rev. Young Winston Davis, Narrative of Rev. Young Winston Davis, in *Memoirs of the Enslaved: Voices from the Slave Narratives*, ed. Spencer R. Crew, Lonnie G. Bunch III, and Clement A. Price (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 143.

¹⁰ Narrative of Minnie Fulkes, in *Memoirs of the Enslaved: Voices from the Slave Narratives*, ed. Spencer R. Crew, Lonnie G. Bunch III, and Clement A. Price (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 144-145.

¹¹ Melton A. McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1991), 85-86.

the clouds or pretends so to think.”¹² Chestnut was able to blend snark and frustration in her diary entry, yet such emotions likely masked an intense rage over the issue. Many wives insisted the victimized woman be sent away, along with any mixed children. The most extreme response was one told by Jacob Manson from North Carolina, who remembered hearing of a wife shooting and killing her philandering husband.¹³ It is unclear if she faced legal ramifications for her actions like Celia, but the story nevertheless underscores the volcanic emotions that these illicit unions provoked on both sides.

Public Discourse Surrounding Miscegenation

While women, of both colors, were often hesitant to speak out on the issue for fear of the consequences in a patriarchal society, white slave-owning men were also relatively quiet about the issue. Speaking out in support of interracial mixings risked undermining the racial hierarchies that white men had constructed. Often the focus, or blame, was shifted to the enslaved women themselves, with the mixings being attributed to their seduction. In a similar vein, German scientist Johann David Schoepf claimed that “in almost every house there are negresses, slaves, who count it an honor to bring a mulatto into the world.”¹⁴ This was obviously a gross exaggeration, but even though written from an outsider’s perspective, Schoepf was likely repeating what had been told to him by white American male slave owners themselves.

A domestic defender of this custom was South Carolina writer and judge William Harper. In his “Memoir on Slavery,” a speech first delivered in 1837, he tried to mollify concerns over the act, saying such sexual unions were “evil,” yet not as degrading as he felt prostitution among

¹² Mary B. Chestnut, March 18, 1861, *Diary from Dixie*, ed. Isabella D. Martin and Myrta Lockett Avery (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 18.

¹³ Jacob Manson, Narrative of Jacob Manson, in *Memoirs of the Enslaved: Voices from the Slave Narratives*, ed. Spencer R. Crew, Lonnie G. Bunch III, and Clement A. Price (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 145-146.

¹⁴ Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation, 1783-1784, Volume I*. (Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1911), 101.

whites could be, since master/slave mixings were “generally casual; he does not make her habitually an associate.”¹⁵ One of the many flaws in Harper’s argument was that many slave owners did in fact “habitually” keep enslaved women as mistresses, such as Richard Johnson, a Senator from Kentucky and the Vice President under Martin van Buren, who subverted the surreptitious nature of these unions and openly flaunted his illicit relationship with his enslaved mistress.

Johnson was far from the only politician to engage in such behavior, but both his openness about it and the prominence of his position make his case notable. What especially roiled many southerners was that he married his mixed daughters off to white men and gave these mixed families part of his estate in his deed.¹⁶ This inevitably became campaign fodder in the 1836 presidential election, with the Whigs heavily criticizing Johnson’s conduct. The issue was serious enough that Virginia’s electors refused to support Johnson as vice president, throwing his election to the Senate, where the Democratic majority voted him in.¹⁷ Though largely unknown to modern audiences, his case was memorable enough that Abraham Lincoln was able to elicit laughter in one of his famed 1858 Senate election debates against Stephen Douglas when he said he had not seen, “a man, woman or child who was in favor of producing a perfect equality, social and political, between negroes and white men. I recollect of but one distinguished instance that I ever heard of so frequently as to be entirely satisfied of its correctness—and that is the case of Judge Douglas’s old friend Col. Richard M. Johnson.”¹⁸

¹⁵ William Harper, “Memoir on Slavery,” in *Thinking Through the Past: A Critical Thinking Approach to U.S. History, Volume I Fifth Edition*, ed. John Hollitz (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015), 279-280.

¹⁶ Thomas Brown. “The Miscegenation of Richard Mentor Johnson as an Issue in the National Election Campaign of 1835-1836,” *Civil War History*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (1993): 6.

¹⁷ Brown, “The Miscegenation of Richard Mentor Johnson as an Issue in the National Election Campaign of 1835-1836,” 27.

¹⁸ Abraham Lincoln, “Speech at 4th Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Part I.” September 18, 1858. Teaching American History. <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-lincoln-douglas-debates-4th-debate-part-i/>

Even seventeen years after he left the vice presidency and eight years after his death, Johnson's unforgivable sin in the eyes of the white public—amalgamation—was political fodder.

No matter how much Johnson's actions may have alarmed white southerners at the time, he was not the author of the Declaration of Independence or the third President of the United States, and his face is not on Mount Rushmore. The man who does fulfill such criteria, Thomas Jefferson, was in the public eye a few decades before Johnson. Nearly two centuries after the death of both men, Jefferson has remained the focal point for public perceptions of master/slave sexual relations, as his relationship with his slave Sally Hemings was controversial both in his lifetime and in successive centuries. DNA evidence and historian Annette Gordon-Reid's groundbreaking 1997 book *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* have largely ended the debate over whether Jefferson fathered Hemings' children. As a result, their relationship has gone from controversial to banal, even being parodied on a December 7, 2002 episode of *Saturday Night Live*. While the association with a president is unique, their relationship typified many such unions because of the involvement of both a widowed man as well as an enslaved woman who was already a mulatto, meaning their children would be even lighter-skinned.¹⁹

Regardless of whatever typifications the relationship may yield, it is replete with contradictions. The obvious one is that the man who carried on such an affair is also the man who believed blacks' "amalgamation with the other colour produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent."²⁰ And, of course, the larger contradiction is that this same man once said all men were created

¹⁹ Williamson, 42.

²⁰ Thomas Jefferson to Edward Coles, August 25, 1814. Encyclopedia Virginia.
https://www.encyclopediaofvirginia.org/Letter_from_Thomas_Jefferson_to_Edward_Coles_August_25_1814

equal. For years, many in both academia and the general public steadfastly denied evidence of the Jefferson/Hemings relationship. Historian Randall Kennedy pointedly wondered why so many were taken aback by the accusations of amalgamation yet tacitly accepted that Jefferson owned human beings, concluding that “For several of the most influential participants in the debate over the Jefferson-Hemming relationship, the answer lies in an aversion to interracial sex. Interestingly enough, that very aversion once *fueled* assertions of the affair.”²¹ Indeed, when newspaper editor James Callender first leveled the accusations against Jefferson, they were meant to destroy him politically due to the white public’s general disgust regarding interracial mixing. But like Richard Johnson three decades later, Jefferson weathered the storm, though the use of amalgamation as political fodder would only increase in the succeeding years.

Specifically, the burgeoning abolitionist movement often lambasted southerners over their sordid interracial affairs and the inherent contradictions that resulted. One such example was the famed abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who cheekily noted in his 1832 book *Thoughts on African Colonization* that, “the planters at the south have clearly demonstrated, that an amalgamation with their slaves is not only possible, but a matter of course, and eminently productive. It neither ends in abortion nor produces monsters.”²² Upon further inspection, however, many abolitionists, particularly white northern abolitionists, were more at ease dealing with interracial mixing in the South than in their own backyard. During the antebellum period, laws against miscegenation were on the books not just in the South, but in over half of the states in the North, some of which remained decades after the Civil War.²³

²¹ Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 52.

²² William Lloyd Garrison. *Thoughts on African Colonization*, ed. William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press, 1968), Part I, 145.

²³ Peter Wallenstein, *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law—An American History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 253-254.

The presence of such laws in Massachusetts, the hotbed of Garrisonian abolitionism, was especially conspicuous. While the state's amalgamation laws were ultimately repealed in 1843, the preceding battle revealed many larger fissures, as Garrison and his influential paper *The Liberator* vacillated on the issue, offering a compromise position of sorts by asserting that even if the miscegenation ban was lifted, intermarriage would not necessarily flourish or be promoted.²⁴ In a sense, they were using a similar thought process as modern proponents of issues as varied as abortion, marijuana, and gun rights pertaining to the feasibility of criminalizing an activity. Meanwhile, some white abolitionists were willing to see the flimsiness of many fears surrounding the issue, such as Lydia Maria Child, who wondered "Shall we keep this class of people in everlasting degradation, for fear one of their descendants *may* marry our great-great-great-great-grandchild?"²⁵ The *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision, legalizing interracial marriage in all states, would not come until 1967, long after the scope of this paper. Yet the antebellum discussions surrounding interracial mixing, and the often-nonconsensual relationships involved, would inform how society treated the mixed offspring of such unions.

While there has been considerable literature, some more reputable than others, on these types of relationships and the surrounding plantation melodrama around them, an important point is often missed on both sides of the discussion. Plantations were neither the bordellos abolitionists portrayed them as nor the well-manicured tourist destinations and wedding venues many treat them as today. They were components of a global economy. The labor force of this economy was slaves, a plight encountered by most blacks and mulattoes in antebellum America.

²⁴ Nicholas Guyatt, *Bind us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 174.

²⁵ Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston: Allen & Ticknor, 1833), 140.

Skin tone mattered. Domestic slave traders evaluated skin tone in judging the health of slaves and their ability to perform the backbreaking field work expected of most. For example, darker slaves were often deemed to be healthier and more suited for outside field work.²⁶ Conversely, mulattoes were generally more likely to be given positions of skilled laborers and house servants, as they were seen as delicate and frail.²⁷ When journalist Frederick Law Olmsted visited Virginia, he noted that “The mulattoes are generally preferred for in-door occupations. Slaves brought up to house-work dread to be employed at field-labour; and those accustomed to the comparatively unconstrained life of the negro-settlement, detest the close control and careful movements required of the house-servants.”²⁸ Obviously, these are only generalities, as there were many mulattoes who worked in the fields and many dark-skinned blacks who worked inside. Furthermore, Annette Gordon-Reed has also noted that being a house servant was not entirely more favorable than being in the fields, as enslaved people in the fields had less contact with their enslavers and thus “greater personal autonomy.”²⁹ Nonetheless, the pattern occurred enough to create color tensions and divisions, which would materialize in multiple regions.

²⁶ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 139, 151.

²⁷ Johnson, 150-152.

²⁸ Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller's Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 184.

²⁹ Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 30.

North

While many mulattoes had similar privileges given to them, their overall experiences differed from region to region. Much has been written on how mulattoes navigated society in the South, as will be seen later in this paper, but much less has been written on their place in the antebellum North. While there were fewer blacks in the North than in the South, and thus fewer opportunities for intermixing, such mixtures did occur, and mulattoes existed throughout the North. Their treatment was often similar to that of blacks, so deciphering any unique qualities is possible, while slightly more challenging than when looking at the South. Census data indicates that approximately twenty-five percent of all Northern blacks were considered mulatto in 1850.¹ Since the two groups were often treated similarly, such delineations could often be subjective and thus difficult to trust with total certainty, especially in 1850, the first year the “mulatto” category appeared on the census. Whatever their exact percentage was, those of mixed-race would play a large role in determining how the North dealt with racism and injustice in the antebellum period.

Northern Mulattoes in the Age of Slavery

When looking at the history of northern mulattoes, it is important to remember that for nearly two centuries, the society they navigated was a slave society. Northern slavery was never as widespread as in the South, yet it still permeated northern society, especially in the eighteenth century. One of the best indicators of how mulattoes maneuvered such a society is fugitive slave advertisements. The two best collections of such advertisements in the North are contained in *"Pretends to Be Free,"* edited by Graham Russell Gao Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, which

¹ John Cummings, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington, D.C.: Arno Press, 1918), 210.

covered New York and New Jersey, and *Blacks Who Stole Themselves*, edited by Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, which covered Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. Historian David Waldstreicher has said that such advertisements “in effect, were the first slave narratives,” as they told a story of slavery, albeit from a completely opposite perspective than later slave narratives.² Such advertisements can be a helpful guide. Unfortunately, they do not show a complete picture of northern mulatto life because not all mulattoes were enslaved, only a small fraction of the enslaved ran away, and masters did not advertise for every runaway slave. In addition, Hodges and Brown calculated that eighty-six percent of the runaways they recorded in New York and New Jersey were young males, which they noted was similar to other colonies.³ While revelatory, only a small subset of the entire Northern mulatto population is covered in these advertisements.

Even with these drawbacks in mind, there is much to be gleaned about the life of mixed-race people from these advertisements. These collections showed both black and mulatto runaways, and in many cases both worked together to reach freedom. To some degree, the advertisements’ descriptions regarding color were not always accurate. Historian Sharon Block highlighted that, “In a slave society where paternal lineage was often purposefully obscured, mulatto status was less a definitive reflection of parentage than a conclusion that had neither consistent nor objective markers.”⁴ Despite this occasional gap between ancestry and advertised color, many runaways who were described as mulattoes exhibited some of the privileges

² David Waldstreicher. “Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (1999): 247.

³ Graham Russell Gao Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, *“Pretends to Be Free”: Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey*. 2nd edition. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), xxx.

⁴ Sharon Block. “Making Meaningful Bodies: Physical Appearance in Colonial Writings,” *Early American Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2014): 542.

occasionally given to mulattoes, such as being house servants, skilled workers, and being taught to read and write.

As said earlier, though, such privileges were not always given to mulatto slaves, and black slaves were sometimes conferred such privileges as well. What is ultimately more telling about mulatto runaways was how they used their color to achieve freedom. In her landmark 2014 book on racial passing, *A Chosen Exile*, historian Allyson Hobbs called this phenomenon “passing as free,” a strategic passing where those with light skin pass as white not for social mobility, as was done later in American history, but strictly for the temporary purpose of escaping to freedom.⁵ As Waldstreicher noted, such passing did not always necessitate pretending to be white, but merely pretending to be free, even if black or mulatto.⁶

Nonetheless, skin color could be an incredibly valuable asset, and many of the enslavers posting these advertisements were aware of this. Some were vague, such as a “likely mulatto fellow” whose color supposedly “being such as to favor his scheme of freedom.”⁷ However, many were more specific regarding how appearances could deceive. One man named Storde was said to have “his Head commonly shaved in order to make himself pass for a white man.”⁸ Such an action would make perfect sense, as many mulattoes in these advertisements had their hair described, often to differentiate them from whites. For example, a man named Lewis was said to

⁵ Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 29, 34.

⁶ Waldstreicher, 262.

⁷ Runaway Advertisement for “likely mulatto fellow,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 19, 1788 in Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1790*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 155-156.

⁸ Runaway Advertisement for Storde, *The New-York Weekly Journal*, May 25, 1747 in Graham Russell Gao Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, ed. *“Pretends to Be Free”: Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey*. 2nd edition. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 21.

be “so white, that he hardly would be taken for a mulattoe, only by his hair.”⁹ Other features were also used as differentiators, as seen with Lens, a seventeen-year-old girl, who was said to potentially “pass for a free person, as she is very well featured all but her nose, and lips.”¹⁰ As with all these advertisements, the end results are not readily available, so it cannot be determined how successful these runaways were in their efforts. It is clear, though, that while mulatto identity did not shield people from slavery in the North, it made it more likely to potentially pass as white in search of a better life.

Another, much more cumbersome, means of escaping slavery was through the court system. The most famous example of this was Jenny Slew. Slew was a mulatta woman in Massachusetts whose father was black, and mother was white. In 1762, she sued her master for enslaving her illegally, as the law had said freedom derived from the mother, thus making her free.¹¹ Although the courts initially ruled against her, she was eventually freed in 1766. Interestingly, her case was observed by John Adams, who wrote in his diary that “This is call’d suing for Liberty; the first Action that ever I knew, of the Sort, tho I have heard there have been many.”¹² It is unclear which other cases Adams was specifically referring to, yet Slew’s case clearly was unique in relation to other potential cases. In winning her case, she used *partus sequitur ventrem*, which had left so many in bondage before and since, to achieve freedom, but this obviously was an option available to only a few.

⁹ Runaway Advertisement for Lewis, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 19, 1766 in Billy G. Smith and Richard Wojtowicz, *Blacks Who Stole Themselves: Advertisements for Runaways in the Pennsylvania Gazette, 1728-1790*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 82.

¹⁰ Runaway Advertisement for Lens, *Parker’s New-York Gazette; or, The Weekly Post-Boy*, June 18, 1761 in Graham Russell Gao Hodges and Alan Edward Brown, ed. *“Pretends to Be Free”: Runaway Slave Advertisements from Colonial and Revolutionary New York and New Jersey*. 2nd edition. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 88.

¹¹ Elizabeth Rauh Bethel, *The Roots of African-American Identity: Memory and History in Free Antebellum Communities* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 45.

¹² John Adams, “November 5, 1766,” in *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 321.

In the decades after Slew's case, slavery ended in the North. The American Revolution is often credited with hastening this process, though it is not as if northern slavery ended once the ink dried on the Treaty of Paris—it was a gradual process that took decades in many states. It has been shown that in the times of slavery, northern mulattoes had occasional advantages in reaching freedom, yet this did not necessarily translate to an exclusively mulatto class emerging among the newly-freed slaves, as occasionally happened in the South. The best summation would be that the North did not have an elite mulatto class but had many elites who were mulattoes.

Northern Mulattoes in the Age of Freedom

The most prominent example of this dynamic in the Early Republic North was Lemuel Haynes. He was one of the clearest examples of how light skin could aid social advancement among free people of color in the North, and how these freedoms could be easily imperiled by changing attitudes. Haynes, like Slew, was the child of a black man and white woman, but he was never enslaved. Rather, his mother gave him to a white family to work as an indentured servant. He was able to gain an education and eventually trained to become a minister, accepting a post in Rutland, Vermont in 1788. What made Haynes unique was not his position, as there were many black and mulatto preachers, but that he served a predominantly white congregation. Despite the inherent difficulties in ministering to a mostly white audience, he succeeded in the position and held it for thirty years. He also married a white woman while ministering to his white flock—again without losing his job. His light skin helped him gain acceptance in this white-dominated society.

This is not, of course, to downplay Haynes' own abilities, nor is it downplaying the role race played in his life. For example, the reason he was stationed in Vermont was because the

Congregationalist church authorities felt his race did not make him suitable to preach in the more populated states in southern New England.¹³ Though he lasted for a long time in Rutland, his support of both abolition and the Federalist Party increasingly became unpopular with his congregation, costing him his position in 1818.¹⁴ Even in comparatively progressive Vermont, Haynes' dismissal showed that even mulattoes who had achieved positions of power were always in jeopardy of having that power taken from them in some fashion, as the absence of slavery did not equate to the absence of prejudice.

Historian Joanne Pope Melish also attributed Haynes' removal to changing perceptions regarding race among whites, arguing that to most whites in 1818, blackness no longer symbolized a labor status, but a fundamental and biological inferiority.¹⁵ Such views were unfortunately not contained to the laypeople in Haynes' congregation, but also shared among his fellow clergymen. These views were generally accompanied by a revulsion to amalgamation and a desire for some form of racial separation.¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards Jr., son of the famous minister, encapsulated such opinions when he said whites should either give "their own sons and daughters in marriage [to blacks], and making them and their posterity the heirs of all their property and all their honours" or pursue "leaving to them [blacks] all their real estates," with Edwards Jr. preferring the latter option.¹⁷ For many northerners, pursuing the latter option meant supporting incipient versions of what would become known as colonization. Edwards Jr's quote

¹³ John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753–1833* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 63.

¹⁴ Saillant, 165.

¹⁵ Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 39.

¹⁶ Saillant, 100.

¹⁷ Jonathan Edwards Jr., "The injustice and impolicy of the slave-trade, and of the slavery of the Africans: illustrated in a sermon preached before the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom, and for the Relief of Persons Unlawfully Holden in Bondage," September 15, 1791. Evans Early American Imprint Collection.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;idno=N18710.0001.001;rgn=div1;view=text;cc=evans;node=N18710.0001.001:4>

showed the capricious nature of Northern whites towards people of color, regardless of skin tone. At times, they valued the contributions of people of color, even submitting to their authority like in Haynes' congregation. More often, though, they wanted racial separation, be it through colonization or other means.

Haynes opposed the colonization movement and other efforts at voluntary or forced black migrations. With their attention focused stateside, many blacks and mulattoes who achieved some level of prominence in the North struggled with how to effectively end both the slavery they saw to the South and the prejudice they faced firsthand. Several of the most eloquent voices on these issues emerged in Philadelphia, one of the more prominent cities in America at the time. Despite being the home of the Liberty Bell, true liberty was a relatively new concept in the city, with the state's gradual abolition law being recently passed in 1780. This law, like similar ones in other states, illustrated both the sluggish nature of progress for people of color in the North and how tenuous their freedom would be, given how recently enslavement had been for many.

Many of the prominent leaders in Philadelphia's black community at this time were of mixed-race, yet many of them had come to the city from elsewhere. Daniel Coker had escaped from slavery in Maryland, ultimately becoming a Methodist minister in Baltimore and later Philadelphia, integrating into the new African Methodist Church denomination. However, Coker was not chosen to be the bishop over the denomination, a decision some attribute to unease among some blacks about Coker's light skin.¹⁸ While not solely as a result of their decision, Coker left America a few years later for an early expedition of what would become Liberia, and then later went to live in the British colony of Sierra Leone. Unlike many mulattoes in the city

¹⁸ Carol V. R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches 1760-1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 55.

and region at large, Coker was a case where his light skin did *not* aid his social advancement, and he eventually sought greener pastures beyond Philadelphia.

A case where someone with light skin *did* come to Philadelphia and rose in society was Robert Purvis, son of a wealthy British-American man and his mulatta wife. Purvis was born in Charleston, which was more amenable to interracial relationships than the rest of the South, as will be seen later in this thesis. Nonetheless, Purvis' father intended to move his family to England, where he was from and where they could live freely. Philadelphia was meant as a temporary stop in this journey, yet it became permanent after Purvis' father passed away in 1826.¹⁹ While left with an uncertain future after his father's death, an inheritance had been set aside for the remaining family. This enabled Purvis to attend the prestigious Amherst Academy in Massachusetts, where classmates included Samuel Colt and future Attorney General Alphonso Taft.²⁰ Color plays an interesting role when looking at Purvis' trajectory, as his very light skin likely aided his acceptance at Amherst. Even if it had, it was never reported that Purvis ever fully passed as white, despite the opportunity and ability to do so. Rather, when he returned to Philadelphia, he did much to ingratiate himself to the vibrant black community in the city.

The most notable connection was made through his relationships with the family of powerful black businessman and community leader James Forten. Purvis had known Forten's family since his youth, and this connection perhaps led to a kinship with the city's black community that precluded any thoughts of passing as white. Purvis made this connection official when he married Harriet Forten, James Forten's daughter. Due to their skin tone difference, their

¹⁹ Margaret Hope Bacon, *But One Race: The Life of Robert Purvis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 15, 21.

²⁰ Bacon, 22.

mere appearance in public was, on one occasion, said to inspire white anger.²¹ Their family often aided fugitive slaves, the most famous of whom being Harriet Jacobs.²² With Forten advancing in years, Purvis himself became one of the more prominent abolitionists in the city, along with another mulatto, William Whipper.

Whipper's main focus in his early speeches was moral reform, a common refrain of the day. A key issue in this regard was temperance, which Whipper supported. He felt the issue was one of character, feeling that if free people of color had strong morals and character that, "the moral force and influence it would send forth would disperse slavery from our land. Yes, it would reverse the present order of things; it would reorganize public opinion, dissolve the calumnies of our enemies, and remove all the prejudices against our complexion."²³ He also, along with Purvis, sought alliances with white abolitionists, endorsing ideas that would be known today as "color-blindness."²⁴ Unfortunately, their efforts did not make prejudice disappear—indeed, it seemed to only get worse. In 1838, the state of Pennsylvania barred blacks, regardless of skin tone, from voting. Blacks and mulattoes were being treated as a maligned monolith, no matter how they sought to comport themselves.

It would be easy to look at Whipper and Purvis' previous views as naïve and perhaps a result of their lighter skin. However, they were not the only ones who held such views, and they cannot be held responsible for the racism they endured. Even in a more despondent post-1838 landscape, another mulatto tried to portray these Philadelphia elites of color in a positive manner. Joseph Willson had, like Coker and Purvis, come to Philadelphia from the South, in his case

²¹ Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 134.

²² Bacon, 82.

²³ William Whipper, "Speech before Colored Temperance Society of Philadelphia," January 8, 1834, in *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume III, The United States, 1830-1846*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 125.

²⁴ Bacon, 51.

Augusta, Georgia. His 1841 book *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* was published anonymously but its authorship was an open secret.

One of Willson's main goals was to combat the idea of a black monolith in the city. He observed that, "Compared in condition, means, and abilities, there are as broad social distinctions to be found here, as among any class of society."²⁵ While not pretending to present a cure-all solution to prejudice and racism, Willson tried to portray black Philadelphia elites in a positive light. Despite the constant oppression they faced, he felt "they not only bear the burden successfully, but possess the elasticity of mind that enables them to stand erect under their disabilities, and present a state of society of which, to say the least, none have just cause to be ashamed."²⁶ Indeed, it has been seen that the vibrance of Philadelphia's black community contributed greatly not only to their own community, but to the national discourse at large.

This vibrance, what Willson called an "elasticity of mind," occurred in the midst of obvious external pressures, but also internal pressures. Although his book celebrated the community's diversity, it also pointed to its divisions. The paragraph after the "elasticity of mind" quote warns of "jealousy of each others' successes" and "envy of advancement or conceived superiority," and the book's final paragraph emphasized the need for solidarity, pleading the community "to be *united* in all efforts for their general improvement."²⁷ While well-intentioned, Willson's book occasionally contributed to these same divisions, such as when he claimed that, "If the virtuous and exemplary members of society should not keep aloof from the vicious and worthless, they would furnish no example to the latter to strive to make themselves

²⁵ Joseph Willson, *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 83.

²⁶ Willson, 101.

²⁷ Willson, 101, 119.

reputable.”²⁸ Though perhaps unsurprising in a book with a titular focus on the “higher classes,” such a quote shows some of the condescension that seemed to plague Philadelphia's black community at the time. Certainly, their main obstacle was white racism, not their own divisions, but the elites’ “elasticity of mind” did not always lead to a mindfulness for every person of color, a dynamic seen in greater degree among elites of color in the Lower South.

Noticeably, color was not mentioned by Willson as one of the community’s potential dividers, though some divisions existed under the surface. A study of census data from 1830 to 1890 showed that half of organizational memberships and sixty percent of organizational leadership roles in the city were held by mulattoes, despite being outnumbered by blacks two to one among the economic elites and four to one in the city at large.²⁹ That research was done by Theodore Hershberg and Henry Williams in 1981, and later historians would do larger studies of color distinctions in the North. Historian James Oliver Horton examined mulattoes in three antebellum Northern cities—Cincinnati, Buffalo, and Boston—in a chapter of his 1993 book *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community*, and Patrick Rael would do a similar study of the same three cities plus Detroit and Chicago in his 2002 book *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North*.

Cincinnati was ultimately somewhat of the outlier when looking at these cities. Since it was closely tied to Southern culture through commerce on the Ohio River, the city mirrored Southern tendencies by having a comparatively large mulatto population, with over half of its blacks being considered mulatto.³⁰ Meanwhile, Horton’s analysis of Buffalo and Boston shows

²⁸ Willson, 102.

²⁹ Theodore Hershberg and Henry Williams, “Mulattoes and Blacks: Intra-group Color Differences and Social Stratification in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia,” in *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century: Essays Toward an Interdisciplinary History of the City*, ed. Theodore Hershberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 423.

³⁰ James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1993), 128-129.

that mulattoes only constituted about a third of their respective black populations, with most being born in the North, as opposed to most blacks in Cincinnati being Southern born.³¹ Cincinnati's mulattoes also utilized generations of training as skilled laborers, where they were afforded more opportunities for such work than in Boston and Buffalo.³² This corroborates what Rael found as well, with southern-born mulattoes often filling skilled labor jobs throughout the North for which northern-born blacks and mulattoes had been denied training.³³ Furthermore, the mulattoes in Cincinnati were more likely to live among themselves in clustered and comparatively privileged communities, slightly resembling some of the mulatto communities that will be seen in the Lower South.³⁴ Some sense of mulatto identity can also be seen through marriage patterns, as ninety-two percent of Cincinnati mulatto men married mulatta women, as did seventy-three percent in Buffalo and seventy-two percent in Boston.³⁵

Despite being an outlier in many regards, Cincinnati also represented the epicenter of how color division could be both fostered and thwarted in the North. As has been seen, there was some degree of social insularity to Cincinnati's mulatto community, yet this did not necessarily translate to political insularity. The effects of racism were faced by both blacks and mulattoes, such as white-led riots in 1829 and 1841. Nevertheless, opportunities for division occasionally appeared, and were not always resisted. In 1844, an offer was made to create mulatto-only schools, which influential local black businessman John I. Gaines rejected, saying such plans

³¹ Horton, 129-130.

³² Horton, 134-135.

³³ Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 28.

³⁴ Horton, 141.

³⁵ Horton, 137.

“would be fraught with evil consequences” and “create prejudices too intolerable to be borne.”³⁶ Statewide, though, opportunities for division were emerging.

Like Jenny Slew nearly a century earlier, some mulattoes in the North found their livelihood improved through the court system, with Ohio providing some limited opportunities. In an 1831 case *Gray v. State*, the Ohio Supreme Court ruled that a quadroon woman had some rights not normally extended to blacks or mulattoes, with the court using the case’s precedent a decade later in 1842 to rule that anyone less than half black was eligible to vote.³⁷ The application of these cases varied by situation, and there was no widespread distribution of rights to those of mixed race.³⁸ However, incremental gains were made. In 1854, John Mercer Langston, son of a white Virginia planter and his mixed black/Native American wife, was ruled “nearer white than black,” and thus “white enough” to be admitted to the state’s bar exam, with the 1842 case being cited as precedent.³⁹ Langston would parlay this breakthrough into a larger gain a year later, when he was elected the town clerk of Brownhelm, Ohio, making him the first African-American elected to public office in American history. Though he left the post a year later, he became a strident advocate for blacks’ rights and for abolition, with such advocacy coming through speeches but also through political means.

This progress was not celebrated by everyone, as was befitting of the turbulent times they occurred in. As I will show later in this thesis, the 1850s were a tumultuous decade, with various crises arising regarding slavery, and the nation becoming increasingly divided. The abolitionist movement also experienced both division and cynicism. For example, William Whipper, who

³⁶ Nikki Marie Taylor, *Frontiers of Freedom: Cincinnati's Black Community, 1802-1868* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 100.

³⁷ Taylor, 99.

³⁸ Taylor, 100.

³⁹ William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom 1829-1865* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 234.

once thought black morals and respectability would eliminate prejudice, now claimed, somewhat presciently, in a letter to Frederick Douglass that, “the power that this prejudice *now* exerts in the few States is not dependent on the foetid breath of slavery, but that the people of those Commonwealths are capable of perpetuating it after slavery is abolished.”⁴⁰ A different type of despondency was seen in another letter to Douglass, one written a few months earlier by another well-known northern mulatto, New York City medical doctor and intellectual James McCune Smith. While there was a general sense of fear among people of color, Smith felt there was a lack of unity due to a lack of equal oppression.

One example he noted was that of Martin Delany, a black intellectual and emigration proponent, who criticized Langston and another Ohio mulatto, William Howard Day, for participating in politics under the aegis of the Ohio Supreme Court’s decision. Smith identified the root of the two sides when he said, “Day and Langston vote because they believe it their duty as *men* to avail themselves of all privileges within their reach; Delany denounces their act, because he is excluded by the very decision which grants them the privilege.”⁴¹ Highlighting its divisive consequences, Smith said the court’s decision plucked “them asunder in the very springs and secret sources of their action,” and felt that the movement must “probe this difficulty to the very bottom and find the remedy, before we can be in position *'to do something* for the common elevation.”⁴² What could have been seen as a local Ohio issue was risking becoming a flashpoint for a larger divide.

⁴⁰ William Whipper to Frederick Douglass, October 1854, in *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume IV, The United States, 1847-1858*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 244.

⁴¹ James McCune Smith to Frederick Douglass, May 4, 1854, in *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume IV, The United States, 1847-1858*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 221.

⁴² Smith, 221.

To some degree, the color divide among people of color in Ohio was exaggerated. Regarding Langston specifically, it should be noted that while his light skin color aided him in passing the bar, he had steadfastly refused to pass as a Spaniard or Frenchman when such options were recommended to him in order to initially get into law school.⁴³ Smith himself should have appreciated this, as he once said it was easier to pass as white in the North than in the South, because in the North “the boundary line is less distinct; the colored white has merely to change his place of abode, cut his old associates, and courtesy will do the rest—he is a white.”⁴⁴ Despite many of the state’s mulattoes being southern-born and given a chance to start a new life up north, most mulattoes in Ohio did not seek to pass either.

Whatever color divisions existed in the state emerged socially, and not necessarily from a judge’s gavel or a jury’s consensus. Furthermore, most mulattoes and those of mixed-race feared they would be rejected from the booth if they showed up to vote. However, in the late 1850s, many did anyway, and while not numerous enough to create a “voting bloc,” they still helped elect many leaders from the new Republican Party who were, if not abolitionists, at the very least determined to hold the southern slaveholders’ power at bay.⁴⁵ Thus, while it is undoubtedly regrettable that some light-skinned people of mixed-race could vote while darker blacks could not, it should not be overlooked that they intended to aid the disenfranchised through the limited privileges they were given. As will be seen in the Lower South, the sense of helping others through one’s privileges was not a universal virtue among those of mixed-race.

⁴³ John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to The National Capitol or The First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1894), 108.

⁴⁴ James McCune Smith, “Freedom and Slavery for Afric-Americans,” *The Liberator*, February 23, 1844, in *The Works of James McCune Smith: Black Intellectual and Abolitionist*, ed. John Stauffer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 62.

⁴⁵ Cheek and Cheek, 269-270.

Upper South

Obviously, the nature and degree of “privileges” given to mulattoes looked different in the slave South than in the (eventually) free North. Statistically speaking, the Upper South (Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware, North Carolina, Tennessee, Maryland, and Virginia) was the epicenter of the publicly identified mulatto population in antebellum America, with two-thirds of mulattoes in the South living in this region by the 1850s.¹ This can ultimately be traced back to the beginnings of colonial America, when Virginia and Maryland were the first colonies to establish miscegenation laws in the 1660s. Unlike in parts of the Lower South, though, these interracial unions were generally hidden from the public, with Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings being one such example. Whatever the laws regarding interracial mixing were, they were often ignored by white enslavers, leading to the region’s large mulatto population.

With such a large contingent of mixed-race individuals, the Upper South was forced to reckon with its racial codifications. Virginia’s 1785 law defined anyone with at least one black grandparent as black, and the rest of the Upper South generally followed Virginia’s lead in this regard.² Around the same time, many slave owners in the Upper South released their slaves, and though this manumission trend was by no means universal and would only last a few decades, it created a free black class. This class was largely rural and was also not as predominantly mulatto as the free black class that would appear in the Lower South. Amongst all blacks in the Upper

¹ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 25.

² Williamson, 13.

South, slave or free, only a third were mulattoes.³ Despite this, their presence was large enough to be a factor in society.

Climate of Oppression

In the decades after this post-Revolution manumission trend, many white elites in the Upper South developed similar, if not heightened, concerns about the presence of free blacks and mulattoes, concerns similar to those mentioned in the North by voices like Jonathan Edwards Jr. The major difference, of course, is that elites in the Upper South were motivated not just by racism but an accompanying desire to preserve slavery. Such concerns only grew in the region after 1800 due to the aborted Gabriel's Rebellion in Virginia. Many schemes, in both North and South, to remove free blacks would gain some traction only to wither away for financial or logistical reasons. Equally as vexing was the lack of consensus over the final location. There was a panoply of options, but the one that ultimately gained the most traction was the American Colonization Society, founded in 1816 to create a colony of black emigrants in West Africa.

Though the idea was germinated by a minister from New Jersey, Robert Finley, many of the society's earliest supporters were powerful men from the Upper South such as Star-Spangled Banner author Francis Scott Key, Speaker of the House Henry Clay, and Supreme Court Justice Bushrod Washington (nephew of George Washington). James Madison would later serve as the Society's president and Thomas Jefferson, while not a member, tacitly supported the concept. Although many rationales were given, these men viewed the enterprise positively because they saw it as a means to preserve slavery.⁴ At the Society's founding meeting, Clay summarized their views most succinctly when he described free blacks as "a useless and pernicious, if not a

³ Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 180-181.

⁴ Amos J. Beyan, *The American Colonization Society and the Creation of the Liberian State: A Historical Perspective, 1822-1900* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 3.

dangerous portion of its [America's] population.”⁵ The group that despised free blacks the most had now tasked themselves with their supposed beneficence.

Of course, while many Upper South elites were seeking to expunge free blacks from their states, they were also profiting from the labor of the blacks they enslaved, with some further abusing their power by having sexual liaisons with enslaved women. Jefferson and Richard M. Johnson have been previously mentioned in this paper, but they were not alone in this regard. Historian Peter S. Onuf saw a connection between support among Virginia elites, specifically Jefferson, for colonization and the prevalence of these elite enslavers' mixed offspring. While not all Virginia elites were colonizationists, Onuf felt those who were sympathetic to the idea believed that, “By removing the living evidence of their sexual transgressions and freeing the next generation from the temptations to which they had succumbed, the fathers of Virginia would redeem their republic.”⁶ This aligns with efforts among enslavers to both remove evidence of any mixing and also to place any blame for such mixing on enslaved women, and not the men who held them in bondage and coerced them into sex.

Whatever level of support colonization might have had in the region, most Upper South masters did not send their mixed-race offspring to Africa. In fact, many looked out for such offspring, giving them an advantage over blacks in a society that did not look fondly on either. In Norfolk, for example, historian Tommy Bogger has discovered several cases involving mulatto offspring being bequeathed their master's slaves as inheritance.⁷ Some enslavers gave their mixed children a level of social integration as well. As mentioned earlier, Richard M. Johnson

⁵ Claude Andrew Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 30.

⁶ Peter S. Onuf, *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 231.

⁷ Tommy Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, 1790-1860* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 114.

married off his mulatta daughters to white men, integrating them into white society. While most Upper South slaveholders with mixed offspring did not go to such lengths, some levels of integration were occasionally provided.

The way Thomas Jefferson treated his mixed-race children shows levels of both privilege and integration. Within the confines of Monticello, these children had accrued a level of privilege compared to other people enslaved by Jefferson. This had developed over time, as their mother Sally Hemings had been not just Jefferson's lover but the mixed-race half-sister of Jefferson's deceased wife Martha. Jefferson placed Sally Hemings' siblings in prominent positions among the enslaved community at Monticello as well. Some of his direct children with Sally Hemings passed into white society in their adulthood, utilizing the fact that they were very light-skinned and only one-eighth black. Annette Gordon-Reed noted that many of the roles that these Hemings children were assigned at Monticello were not roles traditionally carried out by enslaved people, and these skills were perhaps delegated to them by Jefferson in order to aid their eventual integration into white society.⁸

Even without aiding social integration, benefits were meted out in a variety of ways for other mixed-race children, such as John Mercer Langston. Langston, as shown earlier, utilized some of his color-based privileges once he moved to Ohio from Virginia. However, he had been set up for success in part due to the generous inheritance given by his father and the provisions his father had arranged before his death. This left Langston with a positive overall impression of his father, later saying that "He did for his sons all he could; exercising paternal wisdom, in the partial distribution of his property in their behalf and the appointment of judicious executors of

⁸ Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 598-599.

his will.”⁹ John Elder, a former slave, was raised in a similar scenario as Langston, with a white father and a mixed black/Native American mother in an unbalanced, but stable relationship. Also like Langston, Elder’s father died when he was young, yet Elder’s uncle moved the family from Tennessee to freedom in the North.¹⁰

Unfortunately, not all white men cared for the mixed progeny they had fathered. The most famous example of this dynamic is the early life of Frederick Douglass. Born in Maryland in 1818, he never had conclusive proof of his father’s identity, yet he knew he was white. Some thought his master was his father, which made Douglass later reflect that, “The whisper that my master was my father may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of but little consequence to my purpose.”¹¹ Another future luminary born into a similar situation, albeit much later in the antebellum period, was Booker T. Washington. Born in 1856 in Virginia, he also had a white but unidentified father. His reflection on this was slightly more conciliatory than Douglass, saying “Whoever he was, I never heard of his taking the least interest in me or providing in any way for my rearing. But I do not find especial fault with him. He was simply another unfortunate victim of the institution which the nation unhappily had engrafted upon it at that time.”¹² Needless to say, not all mixed children in the Upper South born to white absentee fathers reached the heights of Douglass or Washington. But their experiences illustrate that while many mulattoes, especially those in the Lower South, benefited from being patronized by a white patriarch, that certainly was not always the case.

⁹ John Mercer Langston, *From the Virginia Plantation to The National Capitol or The First and Only Negro Representative in Congress from the Old Dominion* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1894), 16.

¹⁰ John Elder, Narrative of John Elder, in *Memoirs of the Enslaved: Voices from the Slave Narratives*, ed. Spencer R. Crew, Lonnie G. Bunch III, and Clement A. Price (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 94-95.

¹¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Sixth Edition. (London: H.G. Collins, 1851), 11.

¹² Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 2.

While the Upper South was the home of many well-known white slave owners, as well as overseers, who had black mistresses, the inverse also often happened. The Upper South had several instances of white women who mixed with black and mulatto men, though the practice seemed to decrease in the later antebellum period.¹³ Obviously, such relationships occurred elsewhere in America, such as the North, where Lemuel Haynes and Jenny Slew were born from such unions. In the South, though, it was ultimately more difficult for such relationships to proliferate due to both repressive gender norms of the time against women and the fact that a mulatto child born to a white woman in the house was inherently more difficult to hide and/or use as free labor than a mulatto child born to a black woman in the slave quarters.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the weaponization of white female purity that was used to justify lynchings was more a product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century South than the antebellum South.¹⁵ There was no need to suppress blacks through lynching if most were already suppressed and commodified through slavery.

In lieu of lynchings, though, there were still negative consequences for these types of relationships, and for the mulatto children born from these unions. When recounting one example of a white woman giving birth to a black man's child, Harriet Jacobs claimed that "In such cases the infant is smothered or sent where it is never seen by any who know its history."¹⁶ Of course, not all cases were quite as gruesome as Jacobs depicted. For example, one Virginia man gave away his divorced wife's mulatto child to a free black family.¹⁷ Freedom was a relative

¹³ Williamson, 52.

¹⁴ F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 39.

¹⁵ James Kinney, *Amalgamation! Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 15.

¹⁶ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Published for the Author, 1861), 81.

¹⁷ "Petition 11684008." December 14, 1840. Race & Slavery Petitions Project. University of North Carolina-Greensboro. Accessed July 24, 2019. <http://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/details.aspx?pid=2817>

term for these children, though. Even though born of a free woman, most children in these circumstances were bound out as indentured servants for the first thirty-one years of their life, as their conception had technically been against the aforementioned miscegenation laws.¹⁸ While thirty-one was the general term length across the region, it varied at points, such as being lowered to twenty-one years by Virginia in 1765.¹⁹

Pathways to Freedom

For most mulattoes in the Upper South, however, their terms of servitude lasted a lifetime, not just a few decades. Yet like in the colonial North, many used their lighter skin color as a means of aiding their escape from bondage. Many whites were aware of this, and implicitly associated lightness with a propensity to flee. One Tennessee woman, Margaret J. Mason, exemplified this fear when she expressed dismay about one of her late husband's slaves named Green, who was very light and thus made Mason fear his imminent escape.²⁰ Moses Roper, born in North Carolina to a white master and his mulatta slave, experienced difficulties being sold due to his light skin and the concurrent fear of him passing for white and fleeing.²¹ At one point in Roper's eventual escape, he found shelter at a white family's estate, with the husband not believing he was white, but the wife convincing him otherwise.²² Near the end of his journey, while in Savannah, Roper was welcomed onto a ship as a steward, with the captain not knowing he was technically a slave, let alone a fugitive one.²³ Roper did not attribute the latter story to

¹⁸ Kirsten Fischer, *Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 125.

¹⁹ T.O. Madden Jr. and Ann L. Miller, *We Were Always Free: The Maddens of Culpeper County, Virginia, A 200-Year Family History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 17.

²⁰ "Petition 21485723." August 31, 1857. Race & Slavery Petitions Project. University of North Carolina-Greensboro. Accessed July 24, 2019. <http://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/details.aspx?pid=12372>

²¹ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 14-15.

²² Roper, 22.

²³ Roper, 43.

color, but color bias likely explains the captain's mistake, which allowed Roper to "pass as free," as seen previously in the North.

While Roper had a well-read narrative of his journey that was published in 1838, his narrative would later be overshadowed by other escape accounts. Two mixed-race men who escaped from slavery in the Upper South would achieve greater notoriety—Henry Bibb and William Wells Brown. Bibb's narrative of his escape from Kentucky also includes an anecdote similar to Roper's about using color as a means of escaping and passing as free. While in a boat, Bibb "crowded myself back from the light among the deck passengers, where it would be difficult to distinguish me from a white man."²⁴ The ruse was ultimately successful, yet Bibb's reflection on the event was tempered with a forlorn realization about his own identity. He mused that, "This was one of the instances of my adventures that my affinity with the Anglo-Saxon race, and even slaveholders, worked well for my escape. But no thanks to them for it. While in their midst they have not only robbed me of my labor and liberty, but they have almost entirely robbed me of my dark complexion."²⁵ Bibb's quote here is one of the more emotionally honest contemplations of mulatto identity in the antebellum period.

Even in the midst of a thrilling account of his own escape to freedom, due in part to his light skin, Bibb cannot help but look back at all his light skin symbolized. In Bibb's case, his light skin symbolized a connection to slavery and an absent slaveholding father who was bereft of the compassion given to others born in similar circumstances, such as John Mercer Langston. The motif of mulattoes being trapped between two worlds was a common one in literature, and I will show later how it became a trope. Nonetheless, for many this was not a literary motif but a

²⁴ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 51.

²⁵ Bibb, 52.

daily reality. While there are countless examples of mixed-race people using their lighter skin to reach freedom, Bibb's quote helps illustrate the emotional cost this could take. One's light skin could be a ticket to freedom in some cases, but was also a scarlet letter of sorts, signifying not necessarily one's own misdeeds, but the unseemly power dynamics that led to one's own conception.

A similar inner dilemma would be exhibited by one of Bibb's contemporaries, William Wells Brown. Brown escaped from slavery in Missouri, and went on to write many books, such as his own escape narrative as well as the novel *Clotel*, the latter of which will be further discussed later. Brown would use his notoriety from these two works to become a well-known abolitionist. Like Bibb, Brown used his light skin as a sign of slavery's evils, declaring in a speech to the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society that "Why do I stand before you, Mr. Chairman, tonight, not an African nor an Anglo-Saxon, but of mixed blood? It is attributable to the infernal system of American slavery."²⁶ A less strident but equally as subversive deconstruction of racial barriers appeared later in the speech, when Brown briefly made an aside to say, "(I speak not now as an Anglo-Saxon, as I have a right to speak, but as an African)."²⁷ In a society rooted in *partus sequitur ventrem*, the idea that a prominent mulatto could, even briefly, acknowledge a right to speak as an Anglo-Saxon was radical, as well as being a convenient abolitionist talking point.

Though only a quick aside, Brown's comment illustrates a public challenge to the Upper South's (and antebellum America's in general) policies of hypodescent. Such criticisms would occasionally appear elsewhere, such as from Elizabeth Keckley, who would go on to be Mary

²⁶ William Wells Brown, "Speech at the Horticultural Hall," October 23, 1854, in *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume IV, The United States, 1847-1858*, ed. C. Peter Ripley (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 247.

²⁷ Brown, "Speech at the Horticultural Hall," 249.

Todd Lincoln's seamstress and confidant. While being enslaved in North Carolina, Keckley was raped by a white man and bore his son. In her later autobiography, she recorded her contemplations from the time her son was born about the world he was entering, pondering

Why should my son be held in slavery? I often asked myself. He came into the world through no will of mine, and yet, God only knows how I loved him. The Anglo-Saxon blood as well as the African flowed in his veins; the two currents commingled-- one singing of freedom, the other silent and sullen with generations of despair. Why should not the Anglo-Saxon triumph--why should it be weighed down with the rich blood typical of the tropics? Must the life-current of one race bind the other race in chains as strong and enduring as if there had been no Anglo-Saxon taint? By the laws of God and nature, as interpreted by man, one-half of my boy was free, and why should not this fair birthright of freedom remove the curse from the other half--raise it into the bright, joyous sunshine of liberty?²⁸

Though a son of Keckley, who was light-skinned, and a white father would perhaps be able to assimilate into white society, he would likely be judged by society for the taint of black blood in him. Keckley and Brown represent some of the more eloquent voices in challenging such ideas and prejudices, yet these forces would not go away easily.

Such pleas, while impassioned and well-intentioned, would have probably fallen on deaf ears to many dark-skinned blacks. Though he did not speak for this entire contingent, despite his efforts to do so, Martin Delany, seen earlier criticizing Langston and Day for voting in Ohio, was the most vocal proponent of such concerns, as he was not fond of how many prominent mulattoes were being celebrated. While the Upper South societies they left behind often treated them as standardly black, their new audiences in the North often emphasized their white ancestry, attributing their success to it. This roiled Delany, who exasperatedly said "but whatever merit there is in Mr. Bibb, they have always found it very applicable to attribute it to his whiteness— that is, they say that his talents emanate from the preponderance of white blood in

²⁸ Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), 47.

him. This it will puzzle them to say of me!”²⁹ Implicit in this quote is Delany’s belief that his dark skin made him the spokesman for American blacks, a belief that would, in later years, be increasingly framed in juxtaposition to his erstwhile boss at the *North Star*, Frederick Douglass.

While Douglass, one of the most famous Americans at the time of any race, was not willing to qualify his blackness due to his partially white ancestry, he too was not averse to mentioning others’ mixed blood. He once chastised a young John Mercer Langston for his support of emigration, and slyly, if unnecessarily, mentioned that Langston, with a white father and mixed black/Native American mother, had more white blood than black blood.³⁰ Langston’s support for emigration did not last long, however, as he soon became devoted to seeking improvement in the United States. Delany, on the other hand, was convinced that blacks’ freedom could only truly come outside the United States, though he did not support the white-led American Colonization Society. Concurrently, many of the famous runaways already mentioned, such as Bibb and Brown, left the United States for a time due to the Fugitive Slave Act, which had put their lives, even in the free North, in danger.

While some mulattoes in the Upper South did ultimately emigrate, either to Liberia or elsewhere, many were enslaved and thus unable to do so, and even those who were free generally tried to simply make ends meet where they were, as hard as that could be. For the most part, their place in Upper South society was somewhat of a foil for the white establishment. As historian Joshua Rothman said of Virginia, “Without anyone on the other side, being white hardly mattered, and if being white hardly mattered, little else in the socioeconomic order would have

²⁹ Martin Delany, Martin Delany to Frederick Douglass, *North Star*, July 7, 1848 in *Martin R. Delany: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Robert Levine (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 101.

³⁰ William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom 1829-1865* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 197.

made much sense.”³¹ Nonetheless, Virginia's aforementioned 1785 law determining whiteness and blackness allowed some racial fluidity that was copied by other states in the eastern part of the region. North Carolina was one example, where it was once ruled that “Considering how many probabilities there are in favor of liberty of these [mixed-race] persons, they ought not to be deprived of it upon mere presumption, more especially as the right to hold them in slavery, if it exists at all, is in most instances, capable of being satisfactorily proved.”³² Whatever the laws were, this court ruling showed that there was often a blurring of color lines at more localized levels.

Meanwhile, the western frontier of the Upper South, in states such as Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri, provided fewer probabilities in favor of liberty, as there were fewer mulattoes and most were enslaved.³³ With a much smaller free class of blacks or mulattoes, it was harder to have the social fluidity occasionally seen in the eastern part of the Upper South. Occasionally, enclaves in this western frontier would emerge in spite of this, with St. Louis being the most notable example. Several prominent mulattoes would cycle through the city during this period. William Wells Brown spent much of his childhood there, as did explorer and fur trader James Beckwourth. Elizabeth Keckley's enslaver moved to the city, where Keckley was able to acquire numerous wealthy patrons as a seamstress, and these patrons ultimately helped her purchase her and her son's freedom in 1855.³⁴ None of them, though, were part of the mulatto elite of St. Louis.

³¹ Joshua D. Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 207.

³² *Gober v. Gober*, April 5, 1802, in John Hope Franklin, *The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1943), 52-53.

³³ Williamson, 27.

³⁴ Keckley, 57-60.

Those who were at this level were most famously described by Cyprian Clamorgan in his 1858 book *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis*. In many ways, the book is a social description akin to Joseph Willson's *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia*. When comparing the two, historian Samuel Otter noted that Clamorgan's work was more "brazen and satiric."³⁵ This difference can likely be attributed to the authors' identities. Willson was an outsider trying to fit in, whereas Clamorgan had deep roots in the community. He was a descendent of the trader Jacques Clamorgan, who was one the first major traders in the city. The four richest families of color in St. Louis were descended from unions of white settlers and black enslaved women, and Clamorgan's family was one of them.³⁶

In the midst of the nation convulsing over the issue of slavery and race, Clamorgan felt the country could learn something from a group that "circumstances have placed in the path of comparative respectability, and to whom fortune has been kind in the bestowal of the good gifts of life."³⁷ Not content to rest on their laurels, he noted that members of this light-skinned class "are separated from the white race by a line of division so faint that it can be traced only by the keen eye of prejudice—a line so dim indeed that, in many instances that might be named, the stream of African blood has been so diluted by mixture with Caucasian, that the most critical observer cannot detect it."³⁸ Nonetheless, this color line still precluded a level of social mobility that Clamorgan felt this class had yet to reach.

Sometimes this manifested itself in color-specific ways, such as a woman described by Clamorgan whose "great ambition is to have her daughter marry a man as nearly white as

³⁵ Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 130.

³⁶ Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 109.

³⁷ Cyprian Clamorgan, *The Colored Aristocracy of St. Louis* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 45.

³⁸ Clamorgan, 45.

possible.”³⁹ While only one anecdote, having spousal color specificities among mulattoes was not an isolated phenomenon, as this was seen in the North as well. It was also present elsewhere in the Upper South, such as Norfolk, where sixty-eight percent of mulatta women and eighty-one percent of mulatto men had a mulatto spouse.⁴⁰ While it is hard to look at those cross-regional statistics as a coincidence, it is important to remember that marriage in the nineteenth century was more tied to social positioning than love, and these numbers should be analyzed with the knowledge that mulattoes were generally near the top of the social hierarchy among free people of color, or at least perceived to be so. Consequently, most sought marriages that would either preserve or enhance their social status, especially in an era that was precarious for people of color, slave or free.

At least in St. Louis, this color consciousness, if not outright bias, did not mean a complete disavowal of other people of color. Clamorgan mentioned that those in his class, “know that the abolition of slavery in Missouri would remove a stigma from their race, and elevate them in the scale of society.”⁴¹ While this desire for abolition was presented in a self-centered fashion, I will show how self-centeredness among free mulattoes did not always lead to support for abolition.

³⁹ Clamorgan, 49.

⁴⁰ Bogger, 113.

⁴¹ Clamorgan, 47.

Lower South

While it has been seen that mulattoes made tremendous contributions to society in both the North and Upper South, the most prominent theater of mixed-race activity in antebellum America was the Lower South (also known as the Deep South, encompassing South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas). This might appear like a contradiction, as the Lower South was, in the aggregate, a much less inviting place for mulattoes. Only about 17 percent of mulattoes were free in this region, as opposed to about 37 percent in the Upper South.¹ To a degree, this fits expectations, as being “sold down the river” to the comparatively more severe Lower South was a constant fear among slaves in the Upper South. Such severities were not the experience of all in the region, though. Among the entire free black population in the Lower South, a whopping 75 percent was mulatto, with many having a unique place in the social hierarchy.² The two epicenters of such free Lower South mulatto activity were Charleston and New Orleans, two communities that appear in nearly every study of antebellum mulattoes.

South Carolina

The emergence of thriving mulatto communities in both cities did not occur ex nihilo, as both were intrinsically tied to the racial hierarchies that existed in their respective states. The communities that materialized in Charleston were an outgrowth of South Carolina’s own racial origins. South Carolina was initially an extension of the British colony of Barbados, which had a tradition of both miscegenation and a subsequent privileged mulatto class.³ Such traditions

¹ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 25-26.

² Williamson, 25.

³ Williamson, 16.

developed in an environment with a dearth of white women, as seen elsewhere in the Caribbean, which saw even more prominent mulatto classes emerge. Notably, these traditions continued even when more white female colonists came to South Carolina. Remarkably, not a single law was passed against interracial marriage in the state during the antebellum period.⁴ Such laws would be passed after the end of the Civil War. Nonetheless, most interracial mixings in the antebellum period happened outside of wedlock. While these arrangements did not have the protections of marriage, in many cases children produced from these unions were often given special privileges to help them advance in society. This was particularly true in the city of Charleston.

As a result, elite mulatto social groups were formed, with the Brown Fellowship Society being the most notable. The Society was founded in 1790 by five mulatto men, and membership was restricted to free mulatto men in Charleston.⁵ Though aiming to aid their members' widows and children, the society mirrored the South's patriarchal structure and did not allow women to join, nor was there a female auxiliary of the group.⁶ The group proved to be very exclusive regarding color, as even free blacks, regardless of economic status, were not admitted.⁷ Social status was also a barrier, as admitting slaves was out of the question, even if they were enslaved mulattoes.⁸ Such policies made the society prestigious to some and notorious to others, such as Martin Delany, the frequent critic of colorism. In his 1859 novel *Blake, or The Huts of America*, the Society was described as "the bane and dread of the blacks in the state, an organization

⁴ Williamson, 17.

⁵ Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1985), 167.

⁶ Cynthia M. Kennedy, *Braided Relations, Entwined Lives: The Women of Charleston's Urban Slave Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 67.

⁷ Koger, 167-168.

⁸ Koger, 167-168.

formed through the instrumentality of the whites to keep the blacks and mulattos at variance.”⁹

While he may have been incorrect in saying the Society was engineered by whites, he was correct in noting its reflection of color divisions.

Such divisions could be seen socially, through the Society and by the fact that according to 1860 census, over ninety percent of mulatto men in Charleston had mulatto spouses.¹⁰ Meanwhile, these divisions were equally as stark in the economic realm. In addition to being bequeathed benefits from white relatives, many mulattoes in Charleston profited from a white preference to deal with them over blacks.¹¹ Subsequently, a wealth gap developed between the two groups, as between 1800 and 1840, the mean wealth of free blacks in Charleston was \$1,805, while the mean wealth for free mulattoes was \$4,642.¹²

To modern observers, it may seem strange that such privileges could be bestowed in a society that practiced such virulent racism against most of its black population, specifically the enslaved. One would think the existence of such privileges would only extend to perhaps the immediate mulatto kin of the white slave owning class, and not later generations. The persistence of this arrangement, however, survived considerable crisis. This was exemplified most vividly in 1822, when there was an aborted slave revolt in Charleston led by a free black man named Denmark Vesey that led to repressions against blacks across the state, similar to those that occurred after the Stono Rebellion in the state eight decades prior. One group that evaded such repressive measures was the mulatto class in Charleston, and for reasons closely tied to the racial hierarchy. Lawyer and essayist Edwin Holland, in a pamphlet released shortly after the aborted

⁹ Martin Delany, *Blake, or The Huts of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 111.

¹⁰ Koger, 169.

¹¹ Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark, *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 62.

¹² Koger, 169.

revolt, decried the idea of banishing free mulattoes, as he felt they were “a barrier between our own color and that of the black- and in cases of insurrection, are more likely to enlist themselves under the banners of the whites.”¹³ Holland’s words were perhaps the clearest elucidation of how free mulattoes were able to maintain their advantageous position. They were essentially used as a buffer between the two races, a proverbial wall to stop the barbarians at the gate.

One aspect of this buffer-like relationship that Holland emphasized was slave ownership among free mulattoes. In his opinion, since “the greater part of them own slaves themselves, and are, therefore, so far interested in this species of property, as to keep them on the watch, and induce them to disclose any plans that may be injurious to our peace.”¹⁴ Indeed, about one-third of free blacks in Charleston (who were predominantly mulattoes) owned slaves.¹⁵ Callous as his words may sound, the events that led to the foiling of Vesey’s plot show they were not entirely baseless. A mulatto slave named Peter Desverneys learned of the plan and after consulting with William Penceel, a mulatto slave owner, Desverneys was convinced to tell his master about what Vesey was concocting.¹⁶

While, given the racially polarized hierarchies, the term “black slave owner,” or even “mulatto slave owner” might seem like an oxymoron, enslavers of color did exist in antebellum America. Statistics show that, among their respective groups, a free southern white was *only* three times more likely to be a slave owner than a southern free black.¹⁷ Some enslavers of color existed in the Upper South, as previously mentioned in Norfolk, yet it was more of a Lower

¹³ Edwin Holland, *A Refutation of the Calumnies Circulated against the Southern and Western States, Respecting the Institution and Existence of Slavery among Them* (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1822), 84.

¹⁴ Holland, 85.

¹⁵ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 323.

¹⁶ Koger, 30.

¹⁷ David L. Lightner and Alexander M. Ragan, “Were African American Slaveholders Benevolent or Exploitative? A Quantitative Approach,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol 71, No. 3 (2005): 549.

South phenomenon, especially in Charleston. For years, the predominant view of such relationships was given by pioneering black scholar Carter G. Woodson, who said in 1924 that “the majority of the Negro owners of slaves were such from the point of view of philanthropy,” specifically for the purpose of purchasing family members from crueler white enslavers.¹⁸ This assertion was echoed by most subsequent historians such as Ira Berlin, who called black slave owners “benevolent despots.”¹⁹ One of the larger historiographical shifts on the topic came with Larry Koger’s 1985 book *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860*. Koger’s book analyzed transactional documentation from these slave owners, which often showed that many black slave owners were commercially motivated, like white slave owners.

Koger also used demographic data to illustrate that most slave owners of color were commercially motivated. According to the 1850 census, about eighty-three percent of these enslavers were mulatto and ninety percent of their slaves were black. His argument proffered that since free mulattoes (in both North and South) generally married other mulattoes, this decreased the chance of their slaves being their direct relatives.²⁰ Regionally speaking, it has been shown that enslavers of color in the Upper South were more likely to have smaller holdings, presumably of emancipated family members, than in the Lower South.²¹ While this is a generalization, it shows that commercially motivated enslavement was the norm for most enslavers of color in the Lower South.

¹⁸ Carter G. Woodson, “Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol 9, No. 1 (1924): 1.

¹⁹ Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 273.

²⁰ Koger, xiii.

²¹ Lightner and Ragan, 553.

The exemplar for the more exploitative brand of slaveholding among mulatto enslavers was William Ellison. Unlike many prominent mulatto slave owners, Ellison had been born a slave, yet in the decades after he purchased his freedom, he rose to near the top of the economic echelon. Ellison was in the top five percent of South Carolinians by how much real estate he owned, and in the top three percent of all slave owners for wealth in slaves.²² In light of such opulence, it is repugnant but clear why mulatto slave owners like Ellison disavowed slaves and slave rebellions. As Koger said, such masters “had so much to lose and nothing to gain” by supporting someone like Vesey.²³ Such insulation illustrates a lack of the color unity previously seen among blacks and mulattoes in the North and Upper South.

Nevertheless, Ellison, a rural slave owner, was somewhat of an outlier among the state’s mulattoes, specifically compared to those in Charleston. While free people of color made up fifteen percent of the city’s free population, they only owned one percent of the wealth.²⁴ Paltry as this may seem, the relative social and economic mobility was still enticing to many, only exacerbating the gap between free and enslaved, and between those of light and dark skin. One example of the racial tenor set in the state was a quote from an 1835 decision by Judge William Harper, the aforementioned apologist for miscegenation. Harper wrote that, “The condition of the individual is not to be determined solely by distinct and visible mixture of negro blood, but by reputation, by his reception into society.”²⁵ Harper’s quote, cited in several books, shows the fluidity of racial categorizations in South Carolina. Put another way, the concept of race was not merely tied to a person’s skin color, but to their behavior and social status. Historian Amrita Chakrabarti Myers best summarized this when she said, “Race in South Carolina, then, appears

²² Johnson and Roark, 128.

²³ Koger, 164.

²⁴ Johnson and Roark, 205.

²⁵ Williamson, 18.

to have depended in large part on the *performance of respectability*.”²⁶ Needless to say, respectability was tied not just to skin color and behavior, but to freedom status. As a result, many mulattoes, especially the elites, felt behooved to disassociate with enslaved people as much as possible, though some free blacks in the lower rungs of society frequently associated with enslaved people.²⁷

While no voice is totally comprehensive, one helpful way to understand the psyche of Charleston’s free elite mulatto community is through looking at the June 11, 1848 Anniversary Address by Michael Eggart, one of the members of the Friendly Moralist Society, an elite mulatto social group akin to the Brown Fellowship Society. The motif of being torn between two worlds, a recurring theme in art and literature both from and about mulattoes, appears at the beginning of Eggart’s address when he said, “the white man's contumely and the black man of necessity places us in a middle ground.”²⁸ He expanded on this idea when he expressed a longing for, “A land untainted by the prejudice of the white man or the deeper hate of our more sable brethren.”²⁹ While it may seem at best naïve, and at worst reckless, to modern readers, here Eggart equates the disdain emitted by both races, even though one clearly had more of a hand in establishing the racial hierarchy that Eggart and other mulattoes had to navigate.

The vehicle Eggart viewed as the means to effect this change was education, as he felt that if mulattoes were “enlightened by the power of Education how much more vivid how much brighter would the line of separation be between us and the slaves, it would be so bright that it

²⁶ Amrita Chakrabarti Myers, *Forging Freedom: Black Women and the Pursuit of Liberty in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 14.

²⁷ Bernard E. Powers Jr., *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822-1885* (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 57, 61.

²⁸ Michael Eggart, “Anniversary Address,” (June 11, 1848), in Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark. “‘A Middle Ground’: Free Mulattoes and the Friendly Moralist Society of Antebellum Charleston,” in *Southern Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (1982): 246-62, in *Free Blacks in a Slave Society*, ed. Paul Finkelman (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989), 304.

²⁹ Eggart, 305.

would eventually triumph over the prejudice of the white man.”³⁰ In this quote near the end of the address, Eggart espouses views not unlike those held by William Whipper for a time, believing that acting (or in this case learning) properly would help blacks and mulattoes earn equality and the respect of the white establishment. Events not long after this speech would prove otherwise.

Louisiana

Meanwhile, in New Orleans, another free mulatto elite class had emerged, one that was arguably more powerful than the one in Charleston. Like in South Carolina and much of the Caribbean, Louisiana's European colonists, in this case the French, had been predominantly male, and the gender imbalance led many to mix with enslaved black women.³¹ Through the 1724 Code Noir, the French colonial government prohibited both “white subjects, of both sexes, to marry with the blacks,” and “white subjects, and even the manumitted or free-born blacks, to live in a state of concubinage with blacks.”³² Nonetheless, the mixing continued, and though their mulatto offspring took the status of their mother, the French had a relatively lax manumission policy, as did the Spanish, who took over Louisiana in 1769.³³ This ultimately led to the growth of a free mulatto class that was primarily located in New Orleans. As seen earlier, mulattoes were often trained in craft and trade skills, and this pattern continued in Louisiana, where there were few white skilled laborers to compete with, as most whites were more focused on cultivating plantations.³⁴

³⁰ Eggart, 306-307.

³¹ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 109.

³² “Louisiana’s Code Noir.” 1724. Black Past. Accessed July 27, 2019. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/louisianas-code-noir-1724/>

³³ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 109.

³⁴ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 113-114.

When looking at the mulatto class that developed in Louisiana, specifically New Orleans, one can see several parallels to the situation in Charleston, and South Carolina at large, that facilitated their mulatto class' growth. One was simply population ratio. By the eighteenth century, the population of Louisiana was, like South Carolina, majority black.³⁵ Consequently, whites searched for groups to serve as a buffer, with free mulattoes filling the void in the hierarchy in both cases. In Charleston, free mulattoes were not merely a buffer group, but often defended whites in times of crisis. This dichotomy also manifested itself in Louisiana, perhaps even more so. Under both the French and the Spanish, mulattoes served as troops in defense of the colony, fighting the Natchez, the British, and even rounding up fugitive slaves.³⁶ One possible reason for these troops' gusto was that the apparatus under both European powers gave them some freedoms. White local colonial authorities had less autonomy under the French and Spanish than under the British, and since the monarchs in Europe did not see free mulattoes as a threat to their power, they often gave them leeway that mulattoes and other free blacks generally did not have in the British colonies.³⁷

Obviously, this colonial arrangement did not last for relatively long. While France regained the territory from Spain in 1800, Napoleon Bonaparte soon sold it to the United States in the famed Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Despite three changes in sovereignty over the course of three and a half decades, a free mulatto class was burgeoning, with a unique culture based on the territory's potpourri of nationalities. They would go by various names, such as mulattoes, quadroons, Creoles (a term also applied to whites), and persons of color. Notwithstanding such vibrance, the class would face unprecedented challenges under the territory's new management.

³⁵ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 112.

³⁶ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 112-113.

³⁷ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 111.

New laws under American rule threatened the social mobility of free people of color and hampered the previously lax manumission laws. However, this did not dent mulattoes' willingness to defend the white establishment. If anything, American rule strengthened such willingness by showing the tenuous nature of their freedom.

In spite of this tenuousness, new developments in the 1810s made more room for mulatto people to find openings in the color regime that they could work to their favor. Many signed up to quell the 1811 German Coast Uprising, the largest slave revolt in American history, though their biggest test would be defending Louisiana in the War of 1812. With an imminent British invasion and an uncertain racial climate, some used the opportunity to flee to Cuba.³⁸ Nevertheless, many stayed to fight, and had acquired enough goodwill for Louisiana Governor C.C. Claiborne to tell General Andrew Jackson that, "These men, sir, for the most part, sustain good characters. Many of them have extensive connections and much property to defend and all seem attached to arms."³⁹ The war culminated in the Battle of New Orleans, and while it was fought after the peace treaty, it became a tremendous sign of civic pride (January 8 remains a state holiday in Louisiana to this day) and exhibited the sacrifice of free mulattoes. Whatever erosion of mulatto rights that had occurred after 1803 slowed down to a degree, as the military and economic necessity of this class was made evident to their new American rulers.⁴⁰

Some Louisiana mulattoes were able to achieve prominence outside of the city as well, such as several who owned plantations and slaves in more rural areas of the state. One example was Andrew Durnford, who once observed while on a slave trading trip to Richmond that, "some

³⁸ Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 54.

³⁹ Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 71.

⁴⁰ Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters*, 128-129.

of the farmers will and don't like to sell to Negro traders but will, to anybody that buys for their own use.”⁴¹ It is unclear how common such intransigence was, yet Durnford was still able to acquire considerable assets. The expanse of his dealings suggests his slaveholding was far from “benevolence.”

While, as said earlier, most enslavers of color were mulattoes, some mixed-race people warned of potential retribution. One of the more insightful warnings came from Eliza Potter, a mulatta hairdresser whose work took her across the country and who chronicled her experiences in a lively 1859 travel account. In her chapter describing New Orleans, she cautioned that “color makes no difference, the propensities are the same, and those who have been oppressed themselves, are the sorest oppressors. It is a well known fact, those who are as black themselves as the ace of spades will, if they can, get mulattoes for slaves, and then the first word is ‘- my nigger. -’”⁴² There is certainly a larger narrative to this quote about how, in Machiavellian fashion, anyone can become an oppressor if it is to their benefit. Yet this quote also shows that in her observations of Louisiana, colorism was far more than a sociological concept. It was a ticking time bomb just waiting to explode.

A time bomb of color had exploded a few decades before in the former French colony of Saint Domingue, later known as Haiti. The slave-led revolution against the French morphed into a conflict between the largely black slaves and the free mulattoes, the gens de couleur, many of whom were slaveholders. A large amount of gens de couleur fled to New Orleans, with this refugee population more than doubling the city’s population of free persons of color.⁴³ Despite

⁴¹ Andrew Durnford to John McDonogh, June 15, 1835, in David O. Whitten. “Slave Buying in 1835 Virginia as Revealed by Letters of a Louisiana Negro Sugar Planter,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (1970): 236.

⁴² Eliza Potter, *A Hairdresser's Experience in High Life* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 93.

⁴³ Paul F. Lachance. “The Formation of a Three-Caste Society: Evidence from Wills in Antebellum New Orleans,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1994): 234.

this, the relative influence of the free persons of color was decreasing because white immigration into the city increased the white population from thirty-seven percent in 1810 to eighty-five percent by 1860.⁴⁴ The numerical disparity that had led to high amounts of interracial mixing in the city was gradually decreasing, as more whites pursued monoracial marriages more attuned to the social norms from elsewhere in America.

Nonetheless, such mixing still occurred, though the exact nature of such liaisons remains perhaps the most controversial aspect of the city's antebellum period. The most ostentatious examples of this were the "quadroon balls" where white men courted potential mixed-race mistresses.⁴⁵ Such events were widely publicized in the era, reaching audiences far beyond New Orleans. They were depicted as a depravedly delectable combination of vice and backcountry entertainment—Studio 54 meets Walt Disney's Frontierland. One such example was given by white lawyer and inventor John H.B. Latrobe, who said "The beauty of this ball room far exceeds anything of the sort that we have at the North which I have seen."⁴⁶ Regardless, he still decried the fact that the city's quadroons engaged in what he thought was "prostitution which is only the more odious, because the decencies with which it is surrounded by long usage renders it less repugnant to the moral sense and feeling than the wretched and miserable practices of the Northern cities."⁴⁷ The "long usage" admonished by Latrobe, though, involved more than just the balls.

These functions were said to also involve a white man offering his selected quadroon woman and her family an arrangement known as placage, where he would agree to both

⁴⁴ Lachance, 227.

⁴⁵ Williamson, 23.

⁴⁶ John H.B. Latrobe, *Southern Travels: Journal of John H.B. Latrobe 1834* (New Orleans: Historic New Orleans Collection, 1986), 77.

⁴⁷ Latrobe, 77.

“maintain the woman in a certain style” and provide for any potential children that the union might create.⁴⁸ The subsequent relationships resembled concubinages more than marriages, and often did not last very long.⁴⁹ Historian Emily Clark proffered that free women of color who were descendants of Haitian refugees may have been more likely to enter such arrangements at the balls, as they had fewer connections than free women of color with deeper roots in Louisiana.⁵⁰ While no historian doubts the existence of quadroon balls and placage, their exact nature has come under recent scrutiny.

For example, the clientele of these balls was more varied than previously advertised. The attendance of white men, seeking quadroon girls, had always been highlighted by white outside observers. Christian Schultz, from New York, asserted that “The white gentlemen of course are freely admitted, who generally prefer this assembly to their own, which it all times surpasses both in the elegance of its decorations, and the splendour of the dress of the company.”⁵¹ German Duke Karl Bernhard would go further, proclaiming that “At the quadroon ball, only coloured ladies are admitted, the men of that caste, be it understood, are shut out by the white gentlemen.”⁵² Despite the claims of these accounts, men of color were also at these dances.

One example occurred at the end of the Spanish period, where such dances were banned, yet a group of quadroon military captains petitioned to have them reinstated, promising that their

⁴⁸ Williamson, 23.

⁴⁹ Williamson, 23.

⁵⁰ Emily Clark, *The Strange History of the American Quadroon: Free Women of Color in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 154.

⁵¹ Christian Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage Through the States of New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee, and Through the Territories of Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, and New-Orleans: Performed in the Years 1807 and 1808; Including a Tour of Nearly Six Thousand Miles* (New York: Isaac Riley, 1810), 195.

⁵² Karl Bernhard, *Travels through North America, During the Years 1825 and 1826, Volume 1* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Company, 1828), 62.

weekly dance would “not interfere with the one the white people regularly have.”⁵³ Many decades later, during American rule, a New Orleans correspondent for the *New York Herald* reported that one young quadroon man had murdered another at one of the balls, in an event that “created some little excitement among our quadroon population.”⁵⁴ The shooting was indicative of “the balls’ degeneration into bawdy, popular male entertainments pervaded with criminality,” but it also amply demonstrates that the balls’ attendees were not solely white men and quadroon women.⁵⁵

Kenneth Aslakson, author of the article “The “Quadroon-Plaçage” Myth,” is one historian who has been especially doubtful of preexisting narratives on the topic, as he felt many previous interpretations of these events were based on the faulty observations of outside observers such as Latrobe. He considered the narratives surrounding placage particularly faulty. His research found that many of the placage relationships produced several children, indicating that despite the imbalanced power dynamic, they were still longer-term relationships than previous historians asserted.⁵⁶ Furthermore, he found that placage deals were often negotiated apart from the balls.⁵⁷

While historians debate placage’s details and connection to the balls, what cannot be argued is that placage offered free women of color both great risk and great reward. Part of the risk came with the flimsy nature of the agreements. Aslakson concluded that many of these relationships were long term. Yet accounts make it clear there was still substantial risk involved

⁵³ Saraza, Juan Baptista, Pedro Galafate, Pedro Tomás, and Juan Baptista Bacusa. “Petition to the Cabildo,” October 24, 1800, in Ronald R. Morazan. ““Quadroon” Balls in the Spanish Period,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1973): 313.

⁵⁴ “Our New Orleans Correspondence,” *New York Herald*, May 8, 1851. Chronicling America. Library of Congress. Accessed July 29, 2019. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc_laceflower_ver01/data/sn83030313/00271743038/1851050801/0701.pdf

⁵⁵ Clark, 180.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Aslakson. “The “Quadroon-Plaçage” Myth of Antebellum New Orleans: Anglo-American (Mis)interpretations of a French-Caribbean Phenomenon,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2012): 718.

⁵⁷ Aslakson, 719.

for the free women of color. Eliza Potter did not consider these agreements “marriage,” as “Sometimes they live together till they raise generations, then again, others are like some of the license marriages, they stay till they get tired, and then go, some one way, some another.”⁵⁸ Poet Armand Lanusse, a free person of color, wrote a short story titled “A Conscientious Marriage,” where a white man breaks such an agreement to pursue another woman, claiming to his dejected “ex-wife” that “we are only wed by a conscientious marriage.”⁵⁹ Placage clearly had the potential to go awry and reflected an imbalanced power dynamic, yet it still offered women great opportunity.

While the custom is troublesome to both contemporaneous and modern outside observers, many women were able to prosper through placage, even if the male provider passed away. Historian Monique Guillory suggested that many of these women may have subconsciously learned business lessons from the commerce around them.⁶⁰ The commodified could become, in some cases, the commodifiers. The laws certainly made this more difficult, as the state “frowned upon ‘open and notorious concubinage,’” no matter what races it involved, with either party only being able to receive one-tenth of the other’s estate.⁶¹ Meanwhile, any potential children born from concubinages could receive one-fourth of the estate, though if the woman and children were still enslaved, “they could not be freed unless their value did not exceed one-tenth or one-fourth respectively of the total estate.”⁶² This was still a more generous arrangement than such

⁵⁸ Potter, 113.

⁵⁹ Armand Lanusse, “A Conscientious Marriage.” August 15, 1843. Translated by Jennifer Gipson. Centenary College of Louisiana. Accessed July 29, 2019. <http://french.centenary.edu/anglais/ang-conscientiousmar.html>

⁶⁰ Monique Guillory, “Under One Roof: The Sins and Sanctity of the New Orleans Quadroon Balls,” in *Race Consciousness: African American Studies for the New Century*, ed. Judith Jackson Fossett and Jeffrey A. Tucker (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 84.

⁶¹ Judith K. Schafer. ““Open and Notorious Concubinage”: The Emancipation of Slave Mistresses by Will and the Supreme Court in Antebellum Louisiana,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1987): 182.

⁶² Schafer, 182.

children were afforded elsewhere in the South. Regardless, even in a state notorious for interracial mixing, barriers were gradually being put up to prevent women of color from benefitting.

Despite such restrictions, many women made the most of these circumstances. Mulatto abolitionists Lewis and Milton Clarke wrote that their sister had been sold to New Orleans and became a man's mistress. She was able to convince him to emancipate her and then travel the world together.⁶³ He died after just a few years of "marriage," leaving her with a "fortune of twenty or thirty thousand dollars," a result that made the Clarkes conclude that a "more just and remarkable reward of sterling virtue in an unprotected girl, cannot be found in all the books of romance."⁶⁴ Some recipients of such fortunes encountered legal challenges from other family members of the deceased white patriarch. When a man named J.P.V. Dauphin passed away, he gave away two slaves to his concubine, a free woman of color named Mary Uriell. Dauphin's two legitimate children successfully petitioned to have the slaves delivered to them, claiming the private deal bequeathing the slaves to Uriell was "a disguised donation intended to defraud them of their legitimate claim to their father's property."⁶⁵ Such petitions were not always successful.

One fascinating case study of this was Eulalie d'Mandeville Macarty, a successful mulatta businesswoman who was the former concubine of a white businessman. When she was widowed, the man's family sued for her inheritance, yet the Supreme Court of Louisiana ruled in Macarty's favor, with the judge claiming that "she had, in all respects, rendered her condition as reputable... as it could be made," while also mentioning the success of their children, as well as

⁶³ Lewis Clarke and Milton Clarke, *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, during a Captivity of More Than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America* (Chapel Hill: Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999), 75.

⁶⁴ Clarke and Clarke, 75.

⁶⁵ "Petition 20883829." September 21, 1838. Race & Slavery Petitions Project. University of North Carolina-Greensboro. Accessed July 30, 2019. <http://library.uncg.edu/slavery/petitions/details.aspx?pid=8025>

the marriage's consent from *her* family, "which was one of the most distinguished in Louisiana."⁶⁶ This decision is fascinating not necessarily for the result but the rationale, as it speaks to the amount of clout and respectability many free persons of color in the state had been able to achieve. Indeed, it has been said that this class of largely mixed-race people was so entrenched that "by 1836, according to one assessment list, 855 free persons of color in the city paid taxes on property worth \$2,462,470—a total exceeding the value of black-owned property anywhere else in the United States."⁶⁷ Despite a limited sense of freedom, free people of color in New Orleans were able to achieve a level of prominence unprecedented elsewhere in America.

Elsewhere in the Lower South

A look at the rest of the Lower South during this period shows Charleston and New Orleans to be anomalous, but not entirely so. For example, both Mobile and Pensacola had French and Spanish influences, like in New Orleans, which affected the size of their cities' mixed-race population. In 1802, Pensacola's population of free persons of color were seventy-six percent mulatto, whereas the percentage was seventy-seven percent in Mobile during the same year.⁶⁸ Regardless of such percentages, the rest of the Lower South showed that even when conditions created sizable mixed-race populations, this did not always give mulattoes the same prominence as seen in Charleston and New Orleans.

Generally, the mulatto percentages of cities such as Mobile and Pensacola have been considered aberrations in their larger state demographics. Gary B. Mills has shown that this may not be true. His study of Mobile and "Anglo Alabama," (the parts of the state without the Latin

⁶⁶ *Macarty et al v. Mandeville*, March 1848, in *Judicial Cases concerning American Slavery and the Negro, Volume III: Cases from the Courts of Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana*, edited by Helen Tunnicliff Catterall (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1968), 589.

⁶⁷ Schweninger, 71.

⁶⁸ Virginia Meacham Gould, "A Chaos of Iniquity and Discord: Slave and Free Women of Color in the Spanish Ports of New Orleans, Mobile, and Pensacola," in *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Michele Gillespie (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 242.

influences present in Mobile) showed that mulattoes were still a whopping seventy-one percent of the free persons of color, with many of them achieving freedom not through being manumitted illegitimate children, but through self-purchase or white benevolence.⁶⁹ While the social and economic ceiling for such people of mixed race was not as high as in Charleston or New Orleans, the 1850 case *Thurman v. State* showed the potential for some form of assimilation. In the case, a quadroon man named John Thurmond was convicted of rape and sentenced to death, which was the punishment for a “free negro or mulatto.”⁷⁰ However, Thurman’s lawyer argued that, “A mulatto is to be known, not solely by color, kinky hair, or slight admixture of negro blood, or by a greater admixture of it not amounting to one-half, but by reputation, by his reception into society, and by the exercise of certain privileges.”⁷¹ Here, Thurman’s legal case was resting on his social standing, which could be a winning strategy, as seen with the Eulalie d’Mandeville Macarty case.

Ultimately, the Alabama Supreme Court ruled in Thurman’s favor, openly pondering that “If the statute against mulattoes is by construction to include quadroons then where are we to stop? If we take the first step by construction, are we not bound to pursue the line of descendants so long as there is a drop of negro blood remaining?”⁷² The court’s decision showed a willingness to specify gradations of color, much like the Ohio Supreme Court did in terms of voting, illustrating that hypodescent was not the universal policy across antebellum America, even in a firmly slave state like Alabama. Similar decisions were being made across the country, including the Lower South. The case of Abby Guy in Arkansas also demonstrated some of these

⁶⁹ Gary B. Mills. “Miscegenation and the Free Negro in Antebellum “Anglo” Alabama: A Reexamination of Southern Race Relations,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (1981): 19-20.

⁷⁰ Mills, 29.

⁷¹ *Thurman v. State*, June 1850, in *Report of Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of Alabama, During June Term 1850 and a Part of January Term 1851* (Montgomery: J.H. & T.F. Martin, 1851), 277.

⁷² *Thurman v. State*, 279.

themes, as she spent most of the 1850s suing for her freedom. The Arkansas Supreme Court eventually ruled her free. The court's reasoning suggests her ancestry and 'degree of whiteness' was in fact far less important than her assimilation into white society. Of course, her assimilation into white society was possible because of her light skin.⁷³

Despite these legal successes, such victories were predicated primarily on assimilation, not open acknowledgment of one's mixed race. This was not always the case, specifically in Georgia, which in 1765 allowed free mulattoes born outside the state to enter with many rights of British citizens, likely in order to bolster their precarious military position and ward against slave or Indian uprisings by creating a color buffer like what was developing in Charleston and New Orleans.⁷⁴ Whatever its intent, this provision was dropped just five years later, with no free mulattoes having been naturalized by it.⁷⁵ Subsequently, Georgia's hierarchies followed the de facto "one drop" policies of other states in the Lower South, excluding South Carolina and Louisiana, though it had its share of free mulattoes as well.

In her study of the Hunt family of free mulattoes in middle Georgia, historian Adele Logan Alexander found that many of the women in this family would use various means to accentuate their status as free people. Wearing shoes, displaying diamonds, and having longer hair were considered avenues to accomplish this, as enslaved people often did not have the means to accomplish these things.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, many free mulattoes still lived in a general state of fear and as a result avoided the census, either because they were passing as white, did not

⁷³ Ariela Gross, "Litigating Whiteness: Trials of Racial Determination in the Nineteenth-Century South," *Yale Law Journal* 108 (1998): 136-137.

⁷⁴ A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process, The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 263.

⁷⁵ Higginbotham Jr., 263.

⁷⁶ Adele Logan Alexander, *Ambiguous Lives: Free Women of Color in Rural Georgia, 1789-1879* (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1991), 123-125.

want to pay taxes, or had flimsy documentary evidence of their freedom.⁷⁷ In lieu of official documentation, many relied on the protection of whites, in many cases family members. In the Hunts' case, that was their father, Judge Nathan Sayre. A similar case from middle Georgia was Amanda America Dickson, who would become one of the postbellum South's richest women of color, largely due to her father, planter David Dickson.

While these women were able to navigate the Lower South's hierarchies to live constricted but decent lives, perhaps the most remarkable woman of mixed race in antebellum Georgia was born in bondage. Ellen Craft was the child of a quadroon enslaved woman and her enslaver. As an octoroon, she had very light skin, often being mistaken as one of the master's "regular" white children. This constant misunderstanding so infuriated his legal wife that she convinced her husband to sell eleven-year old Ellen Craft away from her mother and the plantation.⁷⁸ When she got older, she married William Craft, a dark-skinned enslaved man, and they both planned to escape. Their plan hinged on her light skin, the exact thing that had gotten her sold as a youth. Not only would Ellen pass as white, with William passing as her servant, but she would pass as male, as white women rarely traveled with male servants.⁷⁹ They would ultimately make their way to freedom, later becoming well-known abolitionists with an unparalleled story. Beyond being a fascinating story, Craft's journey helps illustrate larger themes about passing as free, a concept seen in many of the runaways that have been previously discussed. Craft's story was even more incredible because it truly encapsulated what Allyson Hobbs said, "Looking white is, in many ways, contingent on *doing* white," as Craft not only had

⁷⁷ Alexander, 120-121.

⁷⁸ William Craft and Ellen Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1999), 3.

⁷⁹ Craft and Craft, 24.

to do *white*, but do white *man*, simultaneously subverting and utilizing the performative natures of both race and gender to reach freedom with her husband.⁸⁰

Of course, some mulattoes in the Lower South, specifically the elite classes that emerged in Charleston and New Orleans, did not need to pass as white to be free and prosperous. Clearly, though, they were proverbial exceptions that proved the rule, as their experiences were by no means the norm for most mulattoes in America, let alone most blacks in America. And even these privileged enclaves faced restrictions, with the lack of suffrage being the most notable. The mulatto elites in these enclaves were often *allies* of the establishment, yet were never considered *equals*. There has been considerable debate as to whether mulattoes technically became the “third class” in the racially polarized antebellum America. In his landmark 1971 book comparing race in America and Brazil, historian Carl Degler flatly rejected the notion, saying “There are only two qualities in the United States racial pattern: white and black. A person is one or the other; there is no intermediate position.”⁸¹ Degler was far from alone in concluding this, yet more nuanced views emerged in later scholarship.

Specifically, the nuances concerned not so much the existence of a “third class,” but the comparisons between the two famous American mulatto case studies. Historian Robert L. Harris Jr. felt the two should be separated, as “The mulatto tradition was not as strong or as firmly etched in Charleston as in New Orleans.”⁸² Historian Amrita Chakrabarti Myers also noted that interracial relationships occurred in Charleston, but were never as open as in New Orleans, decreasing opportunities for mulatto children's legitimacy.⁸³ The class that emerged in New

⁸⁰ Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 45.

⁸¹ Carl Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 102.

⁸² Robert L. Harris Jr. “Charleston's Free Afro-American Elite: The Brown Fellowship Society and the Humane Brotherhood,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (1981): 293.

⁸³ Myers, 57, 133.

Orleans objectively had more economic clout than in Charleston, though the two enclaves' degrees of freedom and mulatto tradition are hard to quantify. Regardless, voices such as Edwin Holland plainly show many white Charlestonians thought there was a middle buffer class of mulattoes, and voices like Michael Eggart show many mulattoes thought of themselves as such. The words of another Charlestonian, William Harper, illustrated that there was a degree of racial fluidity that was seen in equal, if not greater, measure in New Orleans.

To Degler's point, America's racial landscape did not codify mulattoes' place in society as fastidiously as in Latin America, but the length and breadth of mulatto privilege in American history, specifically in Charleston and New Orleans, cannot be easily ignored. If anything, the privileged mulatto classes that emerged in the two cities show how some parts of the Lower South were much closer in terms of social and cultural norms to the Caribbean than to the rest of the United States. This being said, economic historian Howard Bodenhorn attempted to expand the paradigm to the Upper South, concluding that "Although rural antebellum Virginia did not witness the emergence of an economically privileged, socially influential, politically connected mulatto elite like Charleston and New Orleans did, the anthropometric evidence shows a marked mulatto advantage."⁸⁴ Bodenhorn evidently felt degrees of freedom were *not* difficult to quantify, but even if one acknowledges widespread mulatto privilege, the degrees of such privilege clearly varied depending on the region and its corresponding racial hierarchy. What seems obvious is that while mulattoes in the Upper South, and the North to a degree, were often conferred *privilege*, they were not conferred *purpose* in the way that mulatto elites in the Lower South or Caribbean were, with the latter having a clearer purpose as a buffer class.

⁸⁴ Howard Bodenhorn. "The Mulatto Advantage: The Biological Consequences of Complexion in Rural Antebellum Virginia," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2002): 45.

Another prism to illustrate this is not by viewing what Lower South whites did to mulattoes, but what they did not do—advocate colonization. It has long been established that most proponents of sending free blacks to Liberia were seeking to support the institution of slavery in America by removing free blacks. However, it also bears noting that most slaveholding whites who were proponents of this venture, or at least sympathetic to it, were from the Upper South, not the Lower South. While there are a variety of reasons why colonization may not have seemed as appealing to Lower South whites, one reason might have been because they felt they needed the mulatto population of free blacks to ensure order. Until they did not.

1850s Turbulence

Much ink has been spilled on how the 1850s marked a turning point in America's history. In the decade, slavery went from an uncomfortable topic to an unavoidable one. A series of flaccid compromises were proffered, such as the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scott decision. Nonetheless, the tensions often turned violent, as seen by the Christiana Riot, Bleeding Kansas, and John Brown's failed revolt at Harpers Ferry. Slavery had always had its defenders, yet the 1850s saw the codification of such beliefs, most popularly seen through the positive-good theory of Virginian George Fitzhugh.¹ Now, slavery was justified not solely as an economic system, but as a moral imperative.

Slavery's Encroachment

A relatively unexamined aspect of these tensions was the nature of slavery adapting to the times and encroaching on previous norms. One norm it encroached on included the privileged position some mulattoes held, particularly in Charleston and New Orleans. The stripping away of their rights was not an overnight phenomenon but was gradual and closely tied to their respective racial hierarchies and the institution of slavery at large. These elite mulatto classes were supposed to help provide a buffer and thus protect slavery, but by the 1850s, as the incidents listed above demonstrated, the institution was coming under unprecedented scrutiny. Throughout the South, Upper and Lower, free blacks were frequently either killed or given the choice of enslavement or exile.²

¹ Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 364.

² Marina Wikramanayake, *A World in Shadow: The Free Black in Antebellum South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 1973), 168-169.

In Charleston, the free mulatto class had weathered the storm of Denmark Vesey, yet now authorities feared that Vesey was more of a harbinger than an isolated incident, and mulattoes would be more of a hindrance than a helping hand. Between 1856 and 1859, seventeen grand juries in South Carolina warned the legislature about the free colored population, the majority of which was mulatto, with one saying that society “should have but two classes, the Master and the slave, and no intermediate class can be other than immensely mischievous to our peculiar institution.”³ Just a decade after Michael Eggart pleaded for a middle ground, such an option was rapidly disappearing. Also implicit in the quote from the grand jury is an undertone that depicts mulattoes as deceitful, or tricksters, a belief that had been held by many for decades, as some felt the white blood in their veins made them simultaneously smarter yet more likely to rebel than darker skinned blacks.⁴

Similar sentiments appeared in Louisiana during the decade, where the New Orleans *Picayune* in 1856 clamored for the removal of free blacks, mostly mulattoes in their state’s case, as the paper felt they were “a plague and a pest in our community, besides containing the elements of mischief to the slave population.”⁵ When the state government did not force out free blacks, as other states in the South and even the Midwest had done, some whites decided to fight “mischief” with mischief. Starting in southwestern Louisiana in 1859, vigilante groups formed, precursors to the Ku Klux Klan strategically if not organizationally, that sought to use violence to remove free blacks and those who associated with them, socially or carnally, from their parishes.⁶ Some fled to New Orleans or even to Haiti, though some were less fortunate and were

³ Wikramanayake, 169-170.

⁴ James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1993), 139.

⁵ Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 66.

⁶ Henry E. Sterkx, *The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), 297-299.

victims of mob violence.⁷ Despite such instances, they ultimately failed in purging Louisiana of free mulattoes. Yet the racial tenor of the state had changed irrevocably. The clock had struck midnight on quadroon balls and the culture that had nurtured, or at least tolerated, such interracial interactions and their subsequent offspring.

One further example of Louisiana's change in its racial hierarchy was that it banned the manumission of enslaved mulatto children in 1857.⁸ This reflected larger changes in the color of slavery in the South during the decade. Put bluntly, the slave population was getting whiter. The number of enslaved mulattoes grew from 247,000 to 412,000, and their percentage of the overall slave population jumped from 7.7 percent to 10.4 percent.⁹ Clearly, this shows that slavery was not “dying out” before the Civil War, as some claim. On the contrary, it was growing and even superseding the familial bonds that once protected some mulattoes. It bears repeating that the majority of mulattoes were already enslaved before the 1850s, but free mulattoes also acutely felt pressured by the polarization.

Historian Loren Schweninger has detailed the various economic consequences of these tensions. He found that the 1850s saw a decline in free persons of color in Charleston who paid realty taxes and free persons of color in New Orleans who were realty owners.¹⁰ However, he also noted that free people of color in the highest echelons of society in both New Orleans and Charleston were largely untouched economically by the decade's tensions.¹¹ In addition, it should be noted that the most egregious bills against free blacks and mulattoes did not pass. One reason was that elite white Charlestonians opposed them. One 1860 petition to the South

⁷ Sterkx, 299-301.

⁸ James Kinney, *Amalgamation! Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 11.

⁹ Williamson, 63.

¹⁰ Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 81.

¹¹ Schweninger, 115.

Carolina State Senate called the labor of skilled free blacks “indispensable,” and that “They are the only workmen who will, or can, take employment in the Country during the summer. We cannot build or repair a house in that season without the aid of the coloured carpenter or bricklayers.”¹² Regardless of the degree of mulatto oppression, it was clear throughout the 1850s that America’s sectional crisis was at the very least threatening, if not succeeding, to upend the social mores that had once been held dear by elite mulattoes.

As seen in South Carolina and Louisiana, rising tensions were most acutely felt in the South, yet they also affected the North. In conjunction with the overall statistical whitening of slavery, which would not have been viscerally witnessed by most white northerners, many feared the rise of “white slavery” as a result of the new Fugitive Slave Act. The Act obviously threatened escaped slaves, leading some of the prominent ones such as William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and William and Ellen Craft to leave the country. But the Act also intensified the already-wanton practice of Southerners coming North and kidnapping free blacks on the often-flimsy presumption of catching runaways. As the thinking of some went, if southerners could come north to retrieve escaped slaves, and if slaves could have near-white skin, then theoretically all white people were under the threat of kidnapping and enslavement.

Historian Lawrence Tenzer went so far as to title his 1997 book on the topic *The Forgotten Cause of the Civil War*. He certainly did not think it was the only cause, yet felt it was a major one. To some degree, such a declaration is exaggerated. White northerners were generally most fearful not of “white slavery” but of black competition for jobs, as seen by antebellum enthusiasm for “free soil” options and later seen in events like the 1863 New York City draft riots, where whites killed many blacks and burned much of their property, including

¹² Schweninger, 132.

the Colored Orphan Asylum where James McCune Smith was medical director. Nevertheless, documentation of the time clearly shows a growing fear among many white northerners of a new, whitened version of chattel slavery.

While concerns over white slavery did not erase preexisting racial biases among northerners, such concerns did provide levels of racial deconstruction that had not hitherto been elucidated. Some of this occurred before the 1850s. Most famously, in the mid-1840s, in a case that the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* said “verifies the adage that “truth is oftentimes stranger than fiction,”” an enslaved woman in New Orleans named Sally Miller was discovered by a German family to be a long-lost relative, Salomé Miller.¹³ After some legal wrangling, Miller was ultimately freed from her master. The story achieved widespread attention, stoking fears among whites that something similar could occur to them. Even William Craft felt impelled to mention the case near the beginning of he and his wife’s narrative, released a decade and a half after the Miller case. Recent biographers, though, such as John Bailey and Carol Wilson, have cast doubts that Sally and Salomé Miller were the same person.

Regardless of whether Sally and Salomé were the same person or not, the case clearly had resonance for the growing abolitionist movement. It became especially pertinent by the 1850s when some, though certainly not all, of their pro-slavery opponents were embracing the malleability of slavery’s color. The most notable example was George Fitzhugh, the aforementioned positive-good theorist, who boldly declared in 1854 that, “Ten years ago we became satisfied that slavery, *black or white*, was right and necessary.”¹⁴ Such remarks horrified abolitionists, who approached the issue in a variety of ways.

¹³ “Case of Sally Miller,” *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, July 25, 1845. Chronicling America. Library of Congress. Accessed July 7, 2019. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1845-07-25/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>

¹⁴ George Fitzhugh, *Sociology For The South: Or The Failure of Free Society* (Richmond: A. Morris, 1854), 225.

One example was a tract produced by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1855 titled “White Slavery in the United States,” which presented a variety of court cases and fugitive slave advertisements that highlighted the issue. The tract ended with a plea that accurately described the underlying color prejudices of the audience, proclaiming “will not those whose ears are closed to the cry of the despised and hated negro extend a helping hand to relieve the anguish of the white slave?”¹⁵ In a speech in the same year to the same American Anti-Slavery Society, William Lloyd Garrison directly warned that “no person can say I am safe, my wife is safe, my mother, or my child is safe; that complexion settles the question in America, that none but black people can be enslaved. Slavery cares not for anybody's complexion; no person is safe.”¹⁶ Both the tract and Garrison were seeking to use a rhetoric of fear to further push an often-hesitant North to intensify their opposition to slavery.

Perhaps the most hesitant Northerners in this regard were the presidents for much of the decade, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan, who were essentially puppets of the Democrats’ southern slave interests. The resulting political ennui led to the issue of white slavery entering the political realm as well. For the 1856 election, Republican supporters of John C. Fremont created a pamphlet titled “The New Democratic Doctrine. Slavery not to be confined to the Negro race, but to be made the universal condition of the Laboring classes of Society,” which was similar in content to the 1855 tract, but with a more political bent, framing the issue as a likely problem under Buchanan. Four years later, abolitionist musician William Henry Fry wrote a book titled *Republican “Campaign” Text-Book, for the Year 1860*, where he warned that “The mixing of bloods has resulted in the rearing of a new race; and the bleaching process is going on

¹⁵ “White Slavery in the United States,” 1855, American Anti-Slavery Society. Library of Congress. Accessed July 8, 2019. <https://cdn.loc.gov/service/rbc/rbaapc/33300/33300.pdf>

¹⁶ William Lloyd Garrison, “Speech at Annual Meeting of American Anti-Slavery Society,” May 9, 1855. Internet Archive. Accessed July 8, 2019. https://archive.org/stream/ASPC0023599100/ASPC0023599100_djvu.txt

so rapidly, that soon the claim to enslave white freemen will be justified by pointing to the fact of a million white slaves.”¹⁷ When analyzing such quotes and tracts, it may seem like mulattoes are a silent voice, yet the increasing furor of the 1850s shows that their mere existence, and proficiency in navigating the cleavages of society, was creating new fears and deconstructions of race in a society that had sought to equate race with slavery but was struggling to maintain this façade in an increasingly changing world.

While in much of the white slavery discussions seen so far, mixed-race people existed as a far-off concept, albeit one that was becoming closer, they would also be used a direct prop for northern audiences. One cultivator of this tactic was Charles Sumner, the abolitionist senator from Massachusetts who, in 1855, discovered a seven-year-old girl named Mary Mildred Williams who had recently been freed from Virginia. He frequently brought her on stage, and had her daguerreotype widely circulated, intending to shock white audiences with her light skin. In a letter deliberately distributed throughout the press, Sumner thought “her presence among us (in Boston) will be more effective than any speech I can make.”¹⁸ Some criticized Sumner’s approach, such as Washington D.C.’s *Daily Union*, which proffered that, “As long as Mr. Sumner's abolition proclivities are confined, as in the present instance, to the judicious and liberal patronage of photographists, we do not apprehend any serious consequences either to the North or the South.”¹⁹ Obviously, the tactic did have serious consequences, at least to Northern audiences, as it inspired many imitators. While he did not use daguerreotypes like Sumner, Rev. Henry Ward Beecher also utilized the tactic. *The New York Times* recorded one of these

¹⁷ William Henry Fry, *Republican “Campaign” Text-Book, for the Year 1860* (New York: A.B. Burdick, 1860), 81.

¹⁸ Charles Sumner to James Stone, February 19, 1855, in *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, March 25, 1855. Chronicling America. Library of Congress. Accessed June 17, 2019. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83035487/1855-03-24/ed-1/seq-3.pdf>

¹⁹ “Senatorial Relaxations,” *The Daily Union*, March 2, 1855. Chronicling America. Library of Congress. Accessed June 17, 2019. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82003410/1855-03-02/ed-1/seq-2.pdf>

incidents, where a young enslaved girl named Pink, who was only one-sixteenth black, was exhibited at Beecher's Brooklyn church. After giving a summary of her condition, one that "drew tears from many eyes," a collection plate was passed around to pay for her freedom.²⁰

In her book on Mary Mildred Williams, author Jessie Morgan-Owens perhaps best described the allure of such exhibitions by attributing their effect to what she called "selective sympathy."²¹ Indeed, the sympathy that was intended was intrinsically tied to preexisting colorist notions, which had aided many people of mixed race for centuries. While it cannot be said that the abolitionist movement was merely a collection of colorist parlor trick artists, the unseemly assumptions present in many of their arguments cannot be ignored. Undoubtedly, darker-skinned people were featured by the movement as well, such as the Edmundson sisters, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. Yet the "selective sympathy" of the movement would seep into other aspects of society, most notably literature.

Tragic Tropes

The main promulgation of this trend was through what would become known as the "tragic mulatto" trope, where someone of mixed blood often encountered tragic circumstances due in part to their ancestry. Similarly, there was also the "tragic octoroon" trope, which was almost a plantation-era version of Cinderella, with such stories involving a very light skinned woman raised by a white father, but his death leading to her being enslaved and denied his inheritance, yet with no Fairy Godmother to save her.²² While the totality of the scholarship analyzing these tropes far exceeds this paper, it is important to understand the contours of the

²⁰ "An Interesting Scene in Plymouth Church -- Purchase of a Slave by the Congregation," *The New York Times*, February 8, 1860.

²¹ Jessie Morgan-Owens, *Girl in Black and White: The Story of Mary Mildred Williams and the Abolition Movement* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 7.

²² Robert Brent Toplin. "Between Black and White: Attitudes Toward Southern Mulattoes, 1830-1861," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (1979): 190.

genre, as such works often informed, or misinformed, much of the American populace regarding mulattoes in America. Needless to say, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the most famous example of this, with many of its main characters being mulattoes. Stowe has been criticized for her patronizing characterization of blacks, and that criticism could also apply to her descriptions of those of mixed-race. For example, when describing the character Eliza Harris, Stowe said, "These natural graces in the quadroon are often united with beauty of the most dazzling kind, and in almost every case with a personal appearance prepossessing and agreeable."²³ Beyond such descriptions, though, there were often more subversive undertones.

While the book is not solely about mixed-race identity, it has various characters commenting on it. At one point, slave owner Augustine St. Clare makes an allusion to the Haitian Rebellion, saying "If ever the San Domingo hour comes, Anglo Saxon blood will lead on the day. Sons of white fathers, with all our haughty feelings burning in their veins, will not always be bought and sold and traded. They will rise, and raise with them their mother's race."²⁴ Near the end of the book, character George Harris made the controversial decision to leave with his wife Eliza to Liberia, as he declared he identified with his mother's race and "if I wished anything, I would wish myself two shades darker, rather than one lighter."²⁵ Scholar Nancy Bentley has noted that Stowe did not consummate some of these undertones, saying "The picture of the white slave's rebellion could not be represented fully in Stowe's poetics of domesticity without converting a system of sentimental signs to oedipal scenes of violent redress."²⁶ While

²³ Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 11.

²⁴ Stowe, 228.

²⁵ Stowe, 365.

²⁶ Nancy Bentley. "White Slaves: The Mulatto Hero in Antebellum Fiction," *American Literature*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (1993): 513-514.

Stowe certainly eschewed such oedipal arrangements for a more maudlin presentation, she did as much to influence the culture as the culture may have influenced her work.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was a cultural phenomenon, with an impact comparable to more modern sensations such as The Beatles or *Star Wars*. While the book did not create the tragic mulatto genre, one example of its influence was in the renewed interest in previous works with mixed-race protagonists. One example of such works was Lydia Maria Child's 1840 short story "The Quadroons," replete with both forbidden love and death, making it arguably more emblematic of the "tragic" aspect of the subgenre. In addition, Richard Hildreth's 1836 novel *The Slave: or Memoir of Archy Moore* was reprinted and retitled in 1852 as *Archy Moore: The White Slave*, making the main character's color and ancestry more prominent. Unlike Stowe's George Harris, Hildreth's Moore admits to colorism, confessing a "sort of contempt for my duskier brothers in misfortune."²⁷ Later in the novel, Moore claims to have "long since renounced that silly prejudice and foolish pride, which at an earlier period, had kept me aloof from my fellow servants, and had justly earned me their hatred and dislike."²⁸ Despite Hildreth's good intentions, though, one cannot ignore the peculiarity of a white man writing a first-person novel about a mulatto ex-slave.

This lack of personal connection and authenticity would be rectified by a variety of authors of color who entered the post-*Uncle Tom's Cabin* deluge of similar works. The most famous example was 1853's *Clotel* by William Wells Brown, a mulatto former runaway discussed earlier. The novel was technically was the first novel written by an African-American, yet it was not originally published in the United States but in Britain, where Brown, an escaped slave, had relocated to flee the encroachment of slave catchers emboldened by the Fugitive Slave

²⁷ Richard Hildreth, *Archy Moore: The White Slave* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 11.

²⁸ Hildreth, 166.

Act. The novel presents a historical fiction of sorts involving the mixed-race daughter of Thomas Jefferson, though it is not based strictly on the Hemings' lives. The book itself has, like many in the genre, an uneven presentation, in this case mixing the plot with Brown's own life, the Sally Miller story, segments of Child's "The Quadroons," and other anecdotes. Regardless, the book succeeds in providing various examples of colorism and prejudice from both light and dark-skinned characters. Meanwhile, his book also warned of mulatto-led violence, like Stowe's *Augustine*, cautioning that "The infusion of Anglo-Saxon with African blood has created an insurrectionary feeling among the slaves of America hitherto unknown."²⁹ However, like Stowe, Brown did not necessarily depict such violence in the novel, with mixed-race characters seeking freedom and the union of families, not violent redress.

Harriet Wilson took a more grounded approach in her novel, which was the first novel by an African-American to be printed in America. 1859's *Our Nig* was largely ignored after its release. It was rediscovered by historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. in 1981, which helped the book regain some notoriety it had lost. Wilson's novel was semi-autobiographical, as it depicts Frado, a mulatta woman who has an unpleasant experience living with a white family in the North. The novel's geographic location made it stand out in the genre, as most "tragic mulatto" novels took place in the South, which complemented Northern abolitionists' critiques of Southern slavery.

Another novel set in the North was *The Garies and their Friends* by Frank J. Webb, released in 1857. Webb added another black perspective to the genre, though he himself is not believed to have been of mixed ancestry. His novel follows an elite white southerner and his mulatta wife, who flee racism in Georgia only to find a different variety of it in Philadelphia. The two die in a race riot, and their two children take divergent paths, with the daughter marrying a

²⁹ William Wells Brown, *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (Boston: Bedford, 2000), 201.

black man and integrating into black society, while the son passed as white and became engaged to a white woman. The son, Clarence, cut off contact with blacks not “because I esteem them my inferiors in refinement, education, or intelligence; but because they are subjected to degradations that I shall be compelled to share by too freely associating with them.”³⁰ Try as he did, his ruse was ultimately discovered, ruining his engagement and costing him his life.

Webb’s novel is somewhat of a violent complement to Joseph Willson’s *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society*, showing the racist underbelly of the City of Brotherly Love that, while portrayed through a fictional story, was a very real reality for Webb, Willson, William Whipper, Robert Purvis, and others. One could surmise that both Webb and Harriet Wilson’s portrayals of Northern racism may have hurt their overall popularity among white Northern audiences. Henry Louis Gates Jr. felt that *Our Nig* was particularly hampered in popularity by “its unabashed representation of an interracial marriage” with Wilson’s portrayal of Frado’s parents.³¹ Webb’s book also had an interracial couple, whereas most novels in the genre depicted amalgamation as an example of white southern male depravity, never as a human relationship. Northern white uneasiness regarding miscegenation has been well-documented, as seen earlier, and they often craved novels with the nonthreatening yet prevalent “tragic mulatto” tropes of Southern, not Northern, racism and having mixed children emerge not from loving interracial relationships but from, for lack of a better phrase, tragic circumstances.

Despite the genre’s prevalence, the “tragic mulatto” phenomenon and its various permutations did not lack detractors. While the “tragic mulatto” literature can be seen as racist to a degree, those who criticized such works at the time employed a more open racism. Naturally,

³⁰ Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and their Friends* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 323.

³¹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Introduction,” in Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig, Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-story White House, North: Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), xxvii.

Uncle Tom's Cabin took the brunt of these critiques. In a work intending to refute Stowe's book, Edward Stearns highlighted the color dynamic, saying "Wherever outrageous cruelties are to be enacted, such as would incite our indignation even if inflicted on a beast, there she introduces full-blooded negroes."³² Conversely, he noted that "when our sympathies are to be enlisted in behalf of fugitives, she takes care to have them not negroes, nor even mulattoes, but quadroons,— men and women all but white, and who, therefore, according to the *fitness of things*, ought not to be in slavery at all."³³ Stearns would be far from the only voice to analyze the selective sympathy apparent in Stowe's characterizations.

In her review of the book, South Carolina author and essayist Louisa McCord more directly used the issue to paint Stowe, who was being hailed at the time not just as a popular author but as a progressive thinker, as a hypocrite, as "She has been obliged, wherever she has introduced her fugitives into the hearts of white families, and *fraternized* them with their white protectors, to represent these fugitives as white, with the slightest possible negro tint. Even *she* has not dared to represent the negro in those scenes where she has boldly introduced the mulatto."³⁴ While feeling that they might have been overrepresented in the book, McCord also had condescending pity for the plight of mulattoes, as she felt nature "seems to disavow him as a monstrous formation which her hand disowns. Raised in intellect and capacity above the black, yet incapable of ranking with the white, he is of no class and no caste. His happiest position is probably in the slave States, where he quietly passes over a life, which, we thank God, seems like all other monstrous creations, not capable of continuous transmission."³⁵ The latter

³² Edward Stearns, *Notes on Uncle Tom's Cabin: Being a Logical Answer to Its Allegations and Inferences Against Slavery as an Institution. With a Supplementary Note on the Key, and an Appendix of Authorities* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Company, 1853), 145.

³³ Stearns, 145.

³⁴ Louisa McCord. Review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *Southern Quarterly Review* (1853): 117.

<http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/reviews/rere113bt.html>

³⁵ McCord, 117-118.

comment, though addressing Stowe's book specifically, also had connections to preexisting conversations regarding mulattoes.

While it has been shown that mulattoes in America had often been given privilege, causing an instinctive belief among many whites that mulattoes were superior to blacks, the realm of pseudo-science had periodically attempted to challenge this notion. McCord's comment regarding mulattoes' inability for "continuous transmission" shows these ideas' prevalence. At the time of McCord's writing in 1853, the most famous proponent of such beliefs had been Josiah Nott, a southern surgeon and anthropologist who wrote in 1843 that mulattoes are "less capable of endurance and are shorter lived than the whites or blacks."³⁶ Such views would continue until the dawn of the Civil War, as Northern pro-slavery physician John H. Van Evrie claimed in 1861 that "mongrelism is a diseased condition" that is "mercifully doomed to final extinction."³⁷ The claims of Nott, McCord, and Van Evrie that mulattoes were inherently sterile, like the mules they had been derisively named after, were obviously not true. Nonetheless, they show that many whites, on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, lacked the patronizing beliefs that had buoyed the profile of many mulattoes, but substituted them with equally insidious claims.

Criticisms of the tragic mulatto and other related tropes also materialized in more recent decades, albeit from a very different perspective than pro-slavery critics like Stearns and McCord. Specifically, many criticisms emerged in the 1960s, when the Civil Rights Movement had fueled the new social movement in academia, leading to sharper critiques of the past, such as these tropes. Perhaps the most well-known example was literary critic and scholar Sterling

³⁶ Josiah C. Nott. "The Mulatto: A Hybrid- Probable Extermination of the Two Races If the Whites and Blacks are Allowed to Intermarry," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences*, Vol. 6, No. 11 (1843): 253.

³⁷ John H. Van Evrie, *Negroes and Negro "Slavery": The First an Inferior Race: The Second Its Natural Condition* (New York: Van Evrie, Horton & Co., 1861), 167.

Brown, who wrote some of the strongest critiques of such tropes. His most pertinent works on the topic were written in the 1930s, but their reprinting in the 1960s shows their contemporaneous relevance. He noted the overall diversionary nature of such tropes and the works that trafficked them, saying that other issues like “segregation, exploitation and the other denials of democracy, all uncomfortable theatre fare, were shelved, whereas the perplexities of a handful of fair mulattoes were misconceived, and exaggerated beyond recognition.”³⁸ Writing in response to Brown and other contemporary critics, literary scholar Jules Zanger conceded many of Brown’s points, but felt such criticisms missed the larger picture—that these works were incredibly effective, if flawed.³⁹

Certainly, the proliferation of works that employed these tropes shows that Zanger’s point was not without merit, but to some degree, like Lawrence Tenzer claiming that white slavery was a cause of the Civil War, his point does not tell the entire story. The fact that some of the harshest critics of the trope were supporters of slavery showed that the novels were still, to Zanger’s point, quite effective. But this did not come without a cost. Colorism obviously existed long before any of these novels were written, and most of the authors had the best intentions when writing them, some of them being people of color themselves. Even in light of these facts, it remains hard to divorce the trope’s ubiquity in the 1850s from Northern fears over “white slavery” and the selective sympathy mustered in such instances.

While those who propagated either tragic mulatto tropes or concerns over white slavery may not have had malevolent intentions, the effects of their selective sympathy would constrict public perceptions of both the black community and the institution of slavery that held many in this community in bondage. White northerners often decried slavery in the South, but the muted

³⁸ Sterling Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 113.

³⁹ Jules Zanger. “The “Tragic Octoroon” In Pre-Civil War Fiction,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1966): 65.

response to works by Frank J. Webb and Harriet Wilson showed that they were unwilling to embrace works that made them confront their own racism. And while they seemingly had nothing in common with southern slaveholders, who often placed lighter-skinned slaves in more prominent positions, the forms of media they chose to patronize often followed similar patterns.

While white slavery is not a well-examined aspect of antebellum America and most “tragic mulatto” novels, other than *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, remain obscure to mass audiences today, their effect has accrued over time. Alice Walker, progenitor of the term colorism, cogently described the deficiency inspired by such works when she said, “their depictions of themselves and black people as whiter than we are has led to a crippling of the imagination and of truth itself for which we pay dearly—in anger, hurt, envy, and misunderstanding—to this day.”⁴⁰ Walker’s critique helps illustrate that while the tragic mulatto subgenre, like the general outrage over “white slaves,” reached a wide audience, specifically in the North, it was not a silver bullet that ended slavery or prejudice, as its popularity was itself augmented by colorism, a form of prejudice. To use the modern parlance, black lives did not matter to mass audiences in the North, but the fear of light-skinned slavery did.

⁴⁰ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 301.

Liberia

Meanwhile, in Liberia, the same color prejudices were taking place. The behavior of several American-born mulattoes in the new country help illustrate many larger points about racial hierarchies and the subsequent prejudices that can result. Though the American Colonization Society (ACS) supposedly desired the freedom and uplift of emigrated blacks in Africa, most free blacks were not willing participants in this scheme. Indeed, between 1822 and 1861, only three percent of America's free black population emigrated to Liberia.¹ Nonetheless, the option of emigration to Liberia loomed large in the black American consciousness, causing most in the abolitionist movement, of all colors, to comment on the issue.

Generally, they were quite hostile to the ACS and saw through its rhetoric. William Lloyd Garrison published the most famous critique in his 1832 *Thoughts on African Colonization*, his only full-length book on any topic. Lydia Maria Child said that, "Whatever other good the Colonization Society may do, it seems to me evident that they do not produce *any* beneficial effect on the condition of colored people in America; and indirectly they produce much evil."² Frederick Douglass was also a consistent critic of both Liberia and any other emigration plans, saying "the free colored people generally mean to live in America, and not in Africa; and to appropriate a large sum for our removal, would merely be a waste of the public money."³ Many black leaders distanced themselves from the term "African-American," as it seemed, to some, too closely aligned with Africa and colonization, as opposed to the broader

¹ Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle Against the Colonization Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), xviii.

² Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (Boston: Allen & Ticknor, 1833), 145.

³ Frederick Douglass, "Colonization." January 26, 1849, *The North Star*, University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project. <https://rbsep.lib.rochester.edu/4382>

term “colored.”⁴ Even those who may have been inclined to emigrate faced logistical challenges. For example, many ships did not depart on time, causing many free blacks to struggle to find housing while waiting for the ship to finally leave its port.⁵

A Brave New World in the Old World

Despite the frequent criticisms of the venture and its logistical challenges, some free blacks and mulattoes did decide to emigrate to Liberia in search of freedom and new opportunities. While they were seemingly embarking on a new adventure, many of their native country’s prejudices and hierarchies would travel with them. Colorism was by no means the only issue that plagued the colonization of Liberia, but it certainly was a key social division in the nation’s initial decades. The main point of contention was that most positions of power were given to mulattoes. The “mulatto clique” that emerged was not as codified as organizations like the Brown Fellowship Society but seemed far from coincidental to many observers. The colony was founded in 1822 yet would not achieve independence until 1847. Consequently, Liberia’s early decades were not altogether dissimilar from America in terms of the power structure, as the white-controlled ACS governed the colony as its own fiefdom. The first conferral of some power was to a colonist of mixed race, Joseph Jenkins Roberts.

Roberts, son of a mulatta mother and white father, was born in Norfolk but raised in Petersburg. Despite restrictions on free people of color in the Upper South, Roberts was able to display his business acumen in his time in Virginia. He became one of the cofounders of an import-export company that was “the largest antebellum black shipping and trading enterprise,”

⁴ James Campbell, *Middle Passages: African-American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 63.

⁵ Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 94.

a business that thrived even after Roberts and his family left for Liberia in 1829.⁶ Roberts was able to gradually parlay his skills into increased connections in Liberia, becoming the colony's first black governor in 1841.

Other mulattoes who emigrated to Liberia were also given positions of power but would not be as content in their positions as Roberts. One of the more notable examples of this was John Brown Russwurm. Unlike most mulattoes who rose to power in Liberia, he was not born in America, as he was born in Jamaica to a white Virginia planter father and a black, likely enslaved, mother. Russwurm's father still supported him from a distance, sending him to a boarding school in Quebec, where he was relatively insulated from racism due to both his light-skinned features and the dearth of blacks in the area, resulting in a lack of internalized fear of them.⁷ He eventually moved to America, though, where he, in 1826, graduated from Bowdoin College in Maine, becoming one of the first black college graduates in American history. Soon afterward, he moved to New York and became coeditor, and later editor, of *Freedom's Journal*, the nation's first black newspaper and a bastion of abolitionism.⁸ However, the paper was also a bastion of anticolonization, which made Russwurm's 1829 decision to emigrate to Liberia all the more difficult.

This decision stunned much of the paper's readership. Nonetheless, historian David Brion Davis posited that Russwurm's time spent "apart from a normal American racial identity" made it "doubtless easier for him to think of leaving it."⁹ Regardless, Russwurm felt that it was a "mere waste of words to talk of ever enjoying citizenship in this country: it is utterly impossible

⁶ Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship, Volume 1* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 155.

⁷ Amos J. Beyan, *African American Settlements in West Africa: John Brown Russwurm and the American Civilizing Efforts* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 5.

⁸ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 201.

⁹ David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 180.

in the nature of things: all therefore who pant for this, must cast their eyes elsewhere.”¹⁰ Once Russwurm arrived in Liberia, though, he became disillusioned not necessarily with the colonization project, but with the ACS’ mismanagement and his lack of promotion to a governorship.¹¹ As a result, in 1836, he accepted an opportunity to become the governor of a colony called Maryland in Liberia, a separate colony that would later be subsumed by Liberia in 1857, six years after Russwurm’s death. His story mirrors that of many mulattoes who came to Liberia, ostracized enough to leave America, but privileged enough to rise to power in the new colony.

Another mulatto emigrant who acquired power but also disillusionment was Louis Sheridan. Sheridan had been a prominent planter and merchant in North Carolina, even owning a few slaves. He had actually been recruited by the ACS, as opposed to the other way around. Though he often disagreed with the colony’s leadership, he was still given authority to start a new settlement.¹² Nevertheless, he, like Russwurm, bristled at the pre-independence power structure. These views were most clearly elucidated in a letter to his friend, prominent white abolitionist Lewis Tappan, where Sheridan was highly critical of the society he had spent only a few months integrating into. He mentioned that he had told a governor that he “had come from the United States to be freed from the tyranny of the white man, and that I should not be easily brought to submit to it,” while also calling his fellow colonists “a few crazy negroes and

¹⁰ John Brown Russwurm, “Liberia: [Casting His Eyes Elsewhere],” *Freedom’s Journal*, February 14, 1829, in Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 201.

¹¹ Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 72, 74.

¹² Willard Gatewood Jr. ““To Be Truly Free”: Louis Sheridan and the Colonization of Liberia.” *Civil War History*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1983): 342.

mulattoes.”¹³ Sheridan would ultimately remain in Liberia, yet his letter, widely published among abolitionists, confirmed the misgivings many in America had of the Liberian scheme.

Needless to say, despite a few opportunities being offered, the mulatto experience in pre-1847 Liberia was not one of total control and freedom, perhaps abating some color tensions between them and darker-skinned black settlers. Eventually, though, these tensions would rise to the surface after independence and the removal of white ACS control. Certainly, the impetus for independence was not solely due to settler pressure, but mainly stemmed from the ACS’ desire to solidify the colony’s diplomatic standing with other nations, particularly Britain and France, which were both increasingly meddlesome in Africa.¹⁴ Yet the immediate decades after independence showed the genesis of the settler class’ political power structure, which often had correlations to skin tone and ancestry. Specifically, the two political parties that emerged were the Republicans and Whigs, the former often being mulattoes and the latter often being darker-skinned blacks. The two parties would jockey for control in the country’s initial decades after independence, with the correlating color and class divisions never receding too far in people’s minds.

It bears emphasis that the native Africans, who vastly outnumbered these American settlers, were generally excluded from the political process. Both parties participated in this exclusion, with the Whigs being slightly more accommodating to the native population. Regardless of party, there were massive gaps between the Americo-Liberians and the natives, despite Liberia’s supposed emphasis on black unity and solidarity. One of the major points of contention was property. The natives had little conception of private property, whereas the new

¹³ Louis Sheridan to Lewis Tappan, July 16, 1838, in *Vermont Telegraph*, December 19, 1838. Chronicling America. Library of Congress. Accessed June 29, 2019. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025661/1838-12-19/ed-1/seq-1.pdf>

¹⁴ Campbell, 68.

emigrants were steeped in Western ideals of capitalism.¹⁵ Inevitably, this would be an issue in a country whose Declaration of Independence claimed to “recognize in all men certain inalienable rights; among these are life, liberty, and the right to acquire, possess, enjoy, and defend property.”¹⁶ Author James Ciment did note that if natives “shed tribal language, dress, and custom” then they could acquire, to use current American phraseology, “a path to citizenship.”¹⁷ Such a path would not be fully realized for the natives for over a century, and when it came it was made by force.

The leader of this burgeoning maelstrom would be Joseph Jenkins Roberts, who would become the Republic of Liberia’s first president in 1848. His ascension created a variety of responses, as some felt his partially white ancestry would make him more amenable to the southern slave owning interests in the ACS, an assumption that was either a relief or a fear depending on one’s perspective at the time.¹⁸ Despite this assumption, Roberts constantly emphasized that Liberia marked a new opportunity for those who had previously been enslaved or otherwise oppressed by whites in America—a chance to create a new black society. His faux-egalitarianism can be seen in a quote from his second inaugural address in 1851, where he said, “nothing is required in Liberia to make her powerful and her citizens respectable, wealthy, and happy, but cheerful hearts and willing hands.”¹⁹ In actuality, it often required much more than “cheerful hearts and willing hands” to succeed in Liberia, as differences would arise, often falling on color lines, regarding how to create this new black society.

¹⁵ Schweninger, 10-11.

¹⁶ “Declaration of Independence — Commonwealth of Liberia (1847).” Declaration Project. Accessed February 28, 2020. <http://www.declarationproject.org/?p=181>

¹⁷ James Ciment, *Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 97.

¹⁸ Claude Andrew Clegg, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 180.

¹⁹ Joseph Jenkins Roberts, Inaugural Address, December 3, 1851 in A. Doris Banks Henries, *The Life of Joseph Jenkins Roberts (1809-1876) and His Inaugural Addresses* (London: MacMillan & Co, 1964), 124.

The most eloquent, yet relentless and dogmatic, critic of the mulatto elites in Liberian society was one of the pioneers of pan-African thought, Edward Blyden. Born in the West Indies, Blyden emigrated to Liberia in 1850 after he was denied higher education opportunities in America due to his race. He became a fervent supporter of the colonization venture, with a concurrent disdain for mulattoes that was evident in one of his first public speeches. During one of his periodic trips to America, the country that once spurned him, Blyden spoke to the Maine State Colonization Society, where he proclaimed that “All the bitter and unrelenting opposition [to colonization] comes from a few *half-white* men, who, glorifying in their honorable pedigree, have set themselves up as representatives and leaders of the colored people of this country, and who have no faith in Negro ability to stand alone.”²⁰ Obviously, Blyden’s quote from Maine was incorrect, as opposition to colonization consisted of blacks, whites, and mulattoes, not just the latter. One must wonder if this quote is an example of him rhetorically imposing Liberia’s color divisions onto America, but it is perhaps equally likely that he witnessed the color divisions in the United States and attempted to correlate them to opinions on colonization.

The answer likely lies somewhere in the middle, though Blyden’s criticisms of mulattoes would soon take on a life of their own. While similar themes from this early speech would be repeated later, this was an early outlier of sorts compared to his future criticisms of mulattoes. One reason was due to its American setting, as Blyden would be in communication with both blacks and whites in America but would not spend a large amount of time there himself. Additionally, most of Blyden’s invective against mulattoes was revealed in private letters, not

²⁰ Edward Blyden, “An Address before the Maine State Colonization Society,” June 26, 1862, in *Black Spokesman: Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, ed. Hollis R. Lynch (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), 15.

publicly. The stringent language in his critiques would increase, but they would rarely be shared in such a public environment as they were in Maine in 1866.

Wherever such opinions were relayed, many of Blyden's critiques of mulattoes in Liberia were often inaccurate, as seen with his comments in Maine. Yet he was accurate when it came to academia. Black and mulatto settlers had battled over where the new Liberia College should be located. Once again, the dividing line was color. This acrimony was largely paralleled by geography, as many mulattoes were congregated in the capital, Monrovia, while settlements further inland had heavier black control.²¹ Consequently, the decision to place the college in Monrovia was seen as a power move on the part of the mulatto elites.

With this as the backdrop, many of the black professors who taught at the college in the 1860s, such as Blyden, scientist/mathematician Martin H. Freeman, and theologian/missionary Alexander Crummell, chafed under what they perceived as oppression by the mulatto elites running the school, whose president was none other than Roberts, the then-retired head of state.²² While Freeman remained at the school, Blyden and Crummell would leave in the 1870s, with Crummell moving back to America after twenty years in Liberia. Near the beginning of this period, in 1866, Blyden commiserated to Crummell in a letter, telling the minister to "Pray the Trustees of Donation to save by timely action, the professors from the disagreeable inconveniences to which they are subject and thus aid in settling a question which unless soon settled may bring upon this country the scenes that have been enacted in Haiti."²³ Though the

²¹ James Fairhead, Tim Geysbeek, Svend E. Holsoe, and Melissa Leach, *African-American Exploration in West Africa: Four Nineteenth-Century Diaries* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 20.

²² M. B. Akpan. "Alexander Crummell and His African "Race-Work": An Assessment of His Contributions in Liberia to Africa's "Redemption," 1853-1873." *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (1976): 193-194.

²³ Edward Blyden to Alexander Crummell, April 14, 1866 in *Selected Letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, ed. Hollis R. Lynch (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1977), 73.

refugee-inducing black/mulatto violence that engulfed Haiti would not occur in Liberia, Blyden was prophetic in seeing that tensions were about to come to a head.

The time of crisis would ultimately come five years later, when dark-skinned Whig President Edward Roye came under fire for both a disastrous loan from Britain and attempting to use loopholes to extend presidential terms from two years to four years. Roberts was coaxed by other mulattoes into returning to politics and ran unopposed against Roye in an election that the sitting president refused to acknowledge.²⁴ In the standoff that ensued, Roye was ousted in a coup and Roberts returned to power. Whether this episode marked Roberts returning to lead his country in their time of need, like George Washington in 1789 or Charles de Gaulle in 1958, or marked the mulatto empire striking back is a matter of interpretation. What *is* clear, in hindsight, is that this marked one of the last gasps of the mulatto elites. Through both death and intermarriage with either black settlers or natives, the mulatto population in Liberia would decrease in both numbers and power by the last quarter of the nineteenth century.²⁵ Roberts passed away in 1876, and the Whigs would ultimately return to power in 1878, maintaining a grip on power that would last a century.

In the meantime, Blyden hoped to avoid any fresh mixed blood entering the country, writing ACS Secretary William Coppinger to “Keep the [Frederick] Douglasses, [John Mercer] Langstons, [Charles B.] Purvises with you [in America]—where they prefer to remain,” while saying in the same letter that “Our legislature has for many years been a farce and a drag upon this country, and any legislature must be absurd and intolerable as long as their constituency is

²⁴ Ciment, 113.

²⁵ Amos Sawyer, *The Emergence of Autocracy in Liberia: Tragedy and Challenge* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1992), 154.

not practically homogenous, but divided and conflicting in its instincts and desires.”²⁶ In the shadow of the recent Royce coup, Blyden continued to peddle his previous criticisms of mulattoes, even rejecting well-known mulattoes (or their offspring) who were, as seen earlier in this paper, quite competent and could have enriched Liberia had they desired to emigrate.

Such views can be seen as a derivation of the “house divided” imagery used by both Jesus and Abraham Lincoln, which Blyden employed to illustrate what he felt were the pitfalls of a mixed society—that it cannot exist with those having “divided” ancestry. To further punctuate his point in the letter, he used an example that showed how attuned he was to the hierarchies that had engendered mulatto elites in America, saying “Witness South Carolina and Louisiana. You have an example in your country of what we have in Liberia on a small scale, but of what we shall have on a large and disastrous scale if you do not interfere to prevent, as far as you are able, an indiscriminate immigration to these shores.”²⁷ While neither a massive emigration from America, of either blacks or mulattoes, nor a larger race war ended up materializing, a larger a threat to Liberia, and Africa at large, was emerging in the coming decade.

The 1880s are known in African history for the “Scramble for Africa,” where European powers, having already intervened in the continent for centuries, assembled in Berlin to carve up African colonies for themselves. In the midst of this, Blyden, the purported father of pan-Africanism, wrote to Coppinger that the “enlightened white man” will “guide the Negro to a wide and open plan—up to the great plateau of humanity, from which he will discern the way for himself—mongrel guidance leads to the narrow, pent up and gloomy spots of cliques and parties

²⁶ Edward Blyden to William Coppinger, October 19, 1874 in *Selected Letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, ed. Hollis R. Lynch (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1977), 175, 177.

²⁷ Edward Blyden to William Coppinger, October 19, 1874 in Lynch, 177.

of duplicity, tyranny, and despotism.”²⁸ Unfortunately, in most African countries, the native blacks were guided not to a wide and open plain, but to the margins of society. Liberia, along with Ethiopia, became notable for avoiding full-scale European colonialism, yet in the successive century Liberia became increasingly dependent on outside, often American, interests, specifically the Firestone tire company. Meanwhile, the natives were still marginalized and only given piecemeal benefits of citizenship, which was granted in 1904. In 1980, these tensions boiled over when sitting President William Tolbert Jr. was killed in a coup led by Master Sargeant Samuel Doe, of native descent, and the Americo-Liberian hold on Liberian politics, maintained for over a century, was irrevocably broken.

Requiem for Colony and Color

Since the 1980 coup, many postmortems for the Liberian experiment have been written, with the settler monopoly on power generally considered to have made some eventual form of violence inevitable. Seemingly, given the prevalence of mulattoes in the early decades of Liberian rule, this would validate the criticisms of Blyden that mulattoes had corrupted and corroded the foundations of Liberian society. Obviously, the truth was more complex than that and depended on the situation. For example, in his offshoot colony Maryland in Liberia, Russwurm went out of his way to accommodate the natives, often to the chagrin of fellow settlers.²⁹ Yet even he once said, “We are in a heathen land, in every sense of the word.”³⁰ It bears noting, however, that such language could be seen in the writings of nearly every settler in Liberia, black or mulatto. Alexander Crummell once decried, with the best of intentions, “how

²⁸ Edward Blyden to William Coppinger, June 6, 1887 in *Selected Letters of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, ed. Hollis R. Lynch (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1977), 375.

²⁹ James, 97.

³⁰ John Brown Russwurm to Ira Easter, June 2, 1837 in Winston James, *The Struggles of John Brown Russwurm: The Life and Writings of a Pan-Africanist Pioneer, 1799-1851* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 236.

carelessly, thoughtlessly, we have ignored the *national* obligation to train, educate, civilize, and regulate the heathen tribes around us!”³¹ The fundamental problem with the Liberian experiment was not the skin tone of its settlers, but the fact that they, under the initial leadership of a largely racist organization, established a colony in West Africa without the mutual desire of those already there.

Given this cross-color culpability among the settlers, many have questioned the overall prevalence of colorism in Liberian society. Historian Carl Patrick Burrowes attributed the perception of colorism largely to the fact that many emigrants came from Virginia, where two-thirds of the free people of color were mulattoes, while also noting that three of the first five Liberian presidents were dark-skinned.³² Additionally, many of the first immigrants to settle in Liberia were mulatto, making their rise to power somewhat of a “first come, first serve” scenario, as opposed to an overarching plan.³³ Nonetheless, such assertions do not hinder the argument of this paper, indeed they strengthen them. The mere fact that mulattoes were often given the first chance to mold Liberian society points to their original privilege, based on various racial hierarchies, in America.

Ultimately, the subsequent prejudices that would emerge in their new country were more pronounced than Burrowes suggested. For example, a mulatto from North Carolina named William Kellogg expressed fear of emigrating to Liberia because of color tensions, preferring to remain “in the hands of my superiors than [fall] into the hands of my inferiors.”³⁴ While Kellogg seemed to fear dark-skin oppression, outside observers often saw the opposite. In 1886,

³¹ Alexander Crummell, “Our National Mistakes and the Remedy for Them,” July 26, 1870 in *Destiny and Race: Selected Writings, 1840-1898*, ed. Wilson Jeremiah Moses (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 177.

³² Burrowes, 69-70.

³³ Fairhead, Geysbeek, Holsoe, and Leach, 20.

³⁴ Tom W. Shick, *Behold the Promised Land: A History of Afro-American Settler Society in Nineteenth-Century Liberia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 15.

colonization agent Dr. James Hall witnessed a dinner where a series of toasts ended with a toast to ““The *Fair* of Liberia;” which last created significant and not pleasant looks on the part of some very dark gentlemen present. The Governor very adroitly came to the rescue by suggesting to the proposer an amendment, “‘The Fair *Sex* of Liberia,’ you doubtless meant?” “*Certainly*, sir; yes sir;” and all was satisfactory.”³⁵ An even starker description was given by British explorer Winwood Reade a decade earlier during Roberts’ final years as president.

There are no real politics in Liberia; though terms borrowed from the States, such as Democrats, Whigs, Old Whigs, &c, are in frequent use. The real parties consist of mulattoes and negroes. A mulatto and a negro are always run against each other at Presidential elections; and the offices of State are filled with men of the same colour as the President himself. The mulattoes are aristocrats, and call the black men niggers. 'Shake hands with him!' I heard a mulatto lady say; 'no, my hand is too white to go into his.' The negroes, on the other hand, call the mulattoes bastards and mongrels, and declare that they are feeble in body and depraved in mind. Their opinion is that of the negroes on the East Coast, who say that God made the white men, and God made the black men, but the Devil made mulattoes.³⁶

Clearly, there was a thinly veiled condescension and racism in how Reade analyzed Liberia, yet he showed how apparent and pervasive the social divisions could be in the relatively new republic. Even those without personal stakes in Liberian society could see that colorism was never a distant factor.

Despite what Reade said, there were “real politics” in Liberia, though the society that emerged, specifically in its first few decades, spoke volumes about the mindset of American mulattoes and how they deconstructed notions of race around them. While mulattoes were not the only ones who yielded, and occasionally abused, power in Liberia, their actions show that, like many of the Lower South mulatto elites, acquiring power and security often took precedence

³⁵ James Hall, “My First Visit to Liberia [Concluded],” *African Repository and Colonial Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (1886): 1.

³⁶ Winwood Reade, *The African Sketch-book: With Maps and Illustrations, Volume 2* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1873), 257.

over color solidarity, let alone a larger pan-African solidarity. The mulattoes who came to power in Liberia certainly gave more lip service to color solidarity than those in the Lower South, but their words often fell on deaf ears to their darker skinned fellow settlers, as well as the natives, when juxtaposed with their actions.

The ultimate failure of these settlers, black and mulatto, was that while they physically left America, they did not emotionally or psychologically leave America, and the society they created bore witness to this. They saw themselves, like early Europeans coming to America, as settlers encountering ignorant savages, and a similar oppression followed. Recaptured slaves, recently freed from the illegal slave trade, were even used as a buffer group, not unlike how mulattoes were sometimes used by whites as a buffer group against blacks in America.³⁷ As historian James Campbell noted, “With the beginnings of sugar and coffee production in the 1850s, the Liberian countryside bore a more than passing resemblance to the Old South, complete with porticoed plantation homes, widespread concubinage, and physical abuse of African workers, many of whom served for life.”³⁸ In trying to replicate America, they succeeded all too well.

As the most virulent critic of mulattoes in Liberia, it is easy to see Blyden as being blinded by his own prejudices. Crummell certainly shared many of the same misgivings regarding Liberia’s mulattoes, saying they “will prevent that republic from becoming the great nation it can be,” though he never categorized the conflict with the existential angst and vitriol that Blyden did.³⁹ Yet Blyden was, in many ways, the clearest vessel in showing how American

³⁷ Sharla M. Fett, *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 160.

³⁸ Campbell, 71.

³⁹ Gregory U. Rigsby, *Alexander Crummell: Pioneer in Nineteenth-Century Pan-African Thought* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 120, 153.

mulattoes often deconstructed racial ideas around them. Some of his misgivings were intellectual, as he was, like many whites in America, a firm believer in the concept of race.

Though he and American whites had diametrically opposed ways of preserving their respective races, Blyden firmly believed race was innate, saying “If a man does not feel it—if it does not rise up with spontaneous and inspiring power in his heart—then he has neither part nor lot in it.”⁴⁰ What is less clear is how his personal life affected such views, as he was in an unhappy marriage with a mulatta wife that made him feel “persecuted outside, but more inside,” and while he would eventually seek another female partner (who was black), it is unclear how much his melancholic home life permeated his larger views.⁴¹ In light of such information, Blyden can be seen as somewhat of a black corollary to Thomas Jefferson. Obviously, only one of them held other human beings in bondage. Yet both men were brilliant political thinkers who were, nevertheless, clouded by exclusivist notions of racial purity that were directly contradicted by their relationships with mulatta women.

Thus, even across the ocean, American mulattoes continued to deconstruct racial hierarchies, though in Liberia’s case they had some hand in crafting them. The nation that was created was supposed to be an oasis, but ultimately became, from the natives’ perspective, an ethnocracy, which is a state with “non-democratic rule for and by a dominant ethnic group, within the state and beyond its borders.”⁴² Even before the 1980 coup and subsequent civil wars, such structural instabilities were apparent. Most scholars have been critical of the overall colonization venture. It is relatively easy to see that the nation some American mulattoes

⁴⁰ Edward Blyden, *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1994), 141-142.

⁴¹ Teshale Tibebu, *Edward Wilmot Blyden and the Racial Nationalist Imagination*. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012), 120.

⁴² Oren Yiftachel, “Democracy or Ethnocracy?: Territory and Settler Politics in Israel/Palestine,” *Middle East Report*, No. 207 (1998): 11.

emigrated to was an ethnocracy, but what might be harder to grapple with was that the country they left was, and to many degrees still is, an ethnocracy.

Conclusion

To say that the United States of America was originally conceived as a country of, by, and for whites is perhaps no longer a radical claim, but how people of mixed race, specifically mulattoes, were treated reveals various permutations of this claim. The antebellum period is interesting to view in this context because it shows how mulattoes simultaneously deconstructed the racial hierarchies that had been established to preserve slavery while also tangentially benefiting from them at times. Obviously, the Civil War changed this dynamic, as now all people of color, with any white ancestry or not, were free.

As a result, the Civil War can be seen as a turning point in the behavior of American mulattoes, as they were no longer in the shadow of slavery. Some tried to hold onto the past, such as William Ellison, who offered his sons to the Confederacy, yet they were rejected because of their race.¹ The fact that the South did not accept their service, despite the Ellisons' prestige and the Confederacy's numerical disadvantage against the North, shows the depths of white supremacist logic. Such thinking would only accelerate after the War, even without slavery. Throughout the South, and even in the North to a degree, segregation and racial separation was the new norm, and while colorism among people of color still existed, mulattoes were no longer a special elite caste anywhere in the country. Simultaneously, the mulatto elites in Liberia were either dying out or intermarrying, with the strife in America still not inspiring any new emigrants.

In this brave new world for American mulattoes, most of the nation adopted, implicitly or explicitly, the "one drop" policy, as many had for decades and centuries prior. By 1920, the

¹ Larry Koger, *Black Slaveowners: Free Black Slave Masters in South Carolina, 1790-1860* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1985), 190.

category of “mulatto” was dropped from the U.S. Census, where it had been used since 1850.² In addition to hypodescent, another preexisting custom that continued was passing, as some mulattoes totally forsook any black identity in the hopes of starting a new life as a white person. This was obviously an option most accessible to people of color with lighter skin, yet the prevalence of passing showed that openly being mulatto no longer reaped as many rewards in the nation’s rapidly changing racial hierarchies.

Of course, many historians once denied that there had ever been much of a reward for being mulatto in antebellum America. Additionally, some even denied that there had ever been any color divisions, such as Eugene Genovese, who said in his landmark 1974 book *Roll, Jordan, Roll* that “The widespread idea that the blacks envied the mulattoes and that the mulattoes looked down on the blacks came largely from postbellum sources.”³ While such divisions may have been addressed *more* in postbellum sources, to say they did not exist prior to the Civil War is patently false. The works of early black nationalists such as Martin Delany and Edward Blyden, whose critiques of mulattoes ranged from astute to histrionic, highlight Genovese’s inaccuracy. James McCune Smith’s calls for color unity do as well, especially considering that they came from a mulatto who could have ignored the underlying issue. While Delany, Blyden, and Smith were all academics who lived as free people, octrooon author Louisa Picquet had once been a slave, and her subsequent memoir, published on the eve of the war, included an incident where a jealous dark-skinned servant told a lie about his light-skinned

² F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation’s Definition* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 11-12.

³ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 429.

fellow servant as a means of revenge.⁴ Even as works of fiction, many books in the “tragic mulatto” genre revealed contemporaneous tensions among those of different skin tones.

If one acknowledges that mulattoes were often placed in unique situations based on the hierarchies around them, as this thesis has shown, then one should consider how they responded to these constraints. Certainly, they were often treated in the same way as blacks were treated, with the two groups often being linked together, even in this paper for the occasional sake of ease. Yet neither was spared from the scourge of racism, though in many cases their responses differed. In her 1978 book *Neither White nor Black*, author Judith Berzon noted that, “Historically, black responses to American racism have fallen into one of three basic ideological frameworks: accommodationism (as expressed by Booker T. Washington and others.); the movement for full citizenship rights and cultural pluralism (expressed, for example, by W.E.B. Du Bois); and the separatist movement characterized by militant racial nationalism.”⁵ In both America and Liberia, those of mixed race would exhibit all three responses listed by Berzon during the antebellum period.

Accommodationism was one of the more pervasive responses when it came to elites, as the fleeting benefits of freedom inevitably led to a desire for more autonomy, and a hope that cooperation with whites would lead to equality. William Whipper was once a proponent of such a response, though the continued barrage of racism both in his native Philadelphia and throughout the country made him sour on the idea. The more committed proponents were the mulatto elites in New Orleans and Charleston, where leaders such as Michael Eggart felt that elite mulattoes could both accommodate and eventually transcend the hierarchies around them.

⁴ Louisa Picquet, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon, or, Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life* (New York: Privately published, 1861), 9.

⁵ Judith R. Berzon, *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 197.

This was often manifested in a Pavlovian reflex to protect such hierarchies, resulting in elites either supporting or directly participating in racialized slavery. Any association with slaves, let alone slave rebellions, was anathema, and color unity became a farce when gradations of color were used to gauge people's worth.

Elsewhere, though, Berzon's second response of advocating for rights both within and across shades of color was also evident, as numerous leaders emerged in this period who sought to, for lack of a better phrase, form a more perfect union by supporting both abolition for enslaved people and civil rights for free people of color. While a figure such as Frederick Douglass is rightfully a national hero and an annual fixture in Black History Month panoramas and things of the like, the history of antebellum American mulattoes is in many ways one of lesser known figures who made a difference either by direct advocacy, such as Whipper, Robert Purvis, and John Mercer Langston; informing larger audiences by sharing the story of their life or their community's life, such as Joseph Willson, Eliza Potter, Cyprian Clamorgan, and Elizabeth Keckley; or a mix of both, such as Ellen Craft, William Wells Brown, and Henry Bibb.

The third response, the often-frustrated combination of separatism and nationalism, presents a more muddled picture, as it has been seen that many early proponents of both separatism and nationalism, specifically Martin Delany, Edward Blyden, and Alexander Crummell, were frequent critics of mulattoes and the colorism that mulattoes both benefitted from and often wielded themselves. Those mulattoes who emigrated to Liberia are more accurately described as *colonists* than *separatists*, as they were trying to re-create an American mindset, not separate from it. They were obviously more attuned to color unity than elites in Charleston and New Orleans, yet their haughtiness and insulated priorities make it appropriate to

suggest that they likely would have acted the same as elites in those two southern cities had they been given the chance.

While not a popular, or feasible, option for many mulattoes or blacks in America, Liberia gradually offered people of color leadership opportunities that were unavailable stateside. It cannot be ignored that mulattoes were given these initial positions, whether with John Brown Russwurm in the adjacent colony Maryland in Liberia or with Joseph Jenkins Roberts in Liberia proper. Once people of color back in America also achieved positions of power, a similar color dynamic emerged. As mentioned earlier, the first African-American elected to public office in American history was John Mercer Langston, a mulatto. After the Civil War, a majority of the people of color elected to Congress during Reconstruction were mulattoes. Most starkly, the first African-American President of the United States, Barack Obama, had a white mother. Without diminishing the talent of such individuals, it strains credulity to consider this pattern a mere coincidence. It was clearly tied to colorism within both the black and white communities, and the concurrent benefits and privileges that it gave lighter-skinned people.

In the years between Reconstruction and Obama, others would become prominent in the black community and larger American zeitgeist who were either mulattoes or people of color with some discernible white ancestry, such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, NAACP president Walter White, singer Lena Horne, and Malcolm X. Even Martin Luther King Jr. had an Irish grandmother on his father's side.⁶ To some degree, such a phenomenon was inevitable, as historian James C. Davis recorded that, "At least three-fourths of all people defined as American blacks have some white ancestry, and some estimates run well above 90 percent."⁷ It must be

⁶ Davis, *Who is Black?*, 7-8.

⁷ Davis, *Who is Black?*, 21.

noted that this pervasive racial mixing between blacks and whites has not always led to a decrease in racism, despite the predictions of some.

Viewing mulattoes as saviors of America's racial divide has occurred throughout the centuries, with white South Carolina author William Gilmore Simms providing something of an early template when he proposed in 1838 that, "The result of illicit intercourse between the differing races, is the production of a fine specimen of physical manhood, and of a better mental organization, in the mulatto; and, in the progress of a few generations, that, which might otherwise forever prove a separating wall between the white and black—the color of the latter,—will be effectively removed."⁸ In his convoluted attempt to defend slavery, Simms ignored the fundamental nature of much of the amalgamation that occurred in his era, that it was often coercive and served to enforce the racial divide, not eclipse it, failing to erase either blackness or whiteness. When mulattoes, the "fine specimens" lauded by Simms, were occasionally propped up by social hierarchies, it was also done, as has been shown, as a means of enforcing the racial divide. Even in other countries, such as Brazil, which historians such as Carl Degler noted had a much clearer three-caste racial structure, a lack of prejudice did not necessarily follow, as Brazil had the ignominy of abolishing slavery two decades *after* the United States, and still has rampant colorism today.

As seen earlier in this thesis, by the 1960s many historians and sociologists were critiquing the "tragic mulatto" tropes of the past, yet they were also casting doubt on any "mulatto savior" theories in the present. Black scholar C. Eric Lincoln was one who felt that, a century after emancipation, the societal benefit of having white ancestry was decreasing. He wrote that "Today, as the Negro develops an increasing appreciation of his own

⁸ William Gilmore Simms, *Slavery in America: Being a Brief Review of Miss Martineau on that Subject* (Richmond, Thomas W. White, 1838), 40.

accomplishments and shares vicariously the accomplishments of other non-whites, the premium on "the master's blood" is signally diminished. Anyone whose light skin color is thought to be of recent derivation is exposed to a degree of censure and disapproval not known in former times."⁹

There is much merit to what Lincoln said, because the era of segregation created a strange phenomenon where colorism still existed, yet the antebellum hierarchies that once elevated some mulattoes were no longer as prominent, leading many to pass as white to reap these benefits. The year in which Lincoln wrote this quote, 1967, is also significant, as it was the year of the Supreme Court's *Loving v. Virginia* decision, which legalized interracial marriage in all fifty states. In so doing, some of the stigma surrounding mulattoes' origins went away, as the country now legally sanctioned all interracial marriages, giving them a level of normalcy that authors like Harriet Wilson and Frank J. Webb had attempted to depict a century prior.

In addition, a level of normalcy was given to those who were the products of interracial relationships. Even though the term "mulatto" became less common in this period, the analysis of people who fit such criteria expanded, with Joel Williamson's 1980 book *New People* being the largest signifier of this. In a retrospective article on the topic a few years later, Patricia Morton said that, "mulattoes may be viewed as the apotheosis, or as the nadir, of Afro-American strength - as the hope or despair of the future."¹⁰ However, such sentiments can often be more harmful than intended, as they continue to perpetuate a false dichotomy for mulattoes—that they are either Frankenstein monsters of America's sordid racial past or the missing link to bridge the racial divide and eliminate all tensions.

⁹ C. Eric Lincoln. "Color and Group Identity in the United States," *Daedalus*, Vol. 96, No. 2, (1967): 534.

¹⁰ Patricia Morton. "From Invisible Man to "New People": The Recent Discovery of American Mulattoes," *Phylon*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1985): 120.

The achievements of many mulattoes both during and after the timeframe of this paper show they are indeed more than mere amalgamations. Conversely, expecting them to singularly end racial division is ultimately based on colorism and a naïve understanding of how institutionalized racism is created and sustained. This external naïveté has only increased colorism in the black community. Other ethnic groups in America, such as Latinos and Asians, have variations of colorism that plague their communities. Yet America's uniquely shameful past with black slavery and its subsequent racial hierarchies make colorism especially notable in a black context. While many dark-skinned blacks have achieved success, and many mulattoes were denied privileges both before and after emancipation, the underlying colorism that frequently buoyed mulattoes' success is still alive and well in America.

The year 2019 provided many examples of colorism's pervasiveness. Sometimes it is dealt with seriously. Controversy erupted in March among many dark-skinned blacks when Will Smith, who is lighter skinned but not biracial, was cast in a biopic as Richard Williams, the dark-skinned father of Venus and Serena Williams. Sometimes it is dealt with humorously. At the NAACP Image Awards on March 30, Chris Rock jokingly referred to disgraced actor Jussie Smollett, who is biracial, as "a waste of light skin," adding "You know what I could do with that light skin? That curly hair? My career would be out of here- fucking running Hollywood."¹¹ And sometimes it is dealt with using both approaches. On January 15, an episode of the sitcom *blackish* touched on colorism within the show's main family, the Johnsons. In the episode, main character Dre Johnson, when talking about dark-skinned representation, bemoaned that "God

¹¹ Chris Rock. "Chris Rock: Jussie Smollett, You Don't Get No Respect From Me | Image Awards 50." March 30, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACaD6aheUPk>. Accessed April 18, 2019.

forbid you say you feel left out, and you're called a crab in a barrel. The only time I see a dark skin person on TV is when the news says the police have murdered another one of us!”¹² A “crab in a barrel” is a phrase in the black vernacular that describes someone who seeks to undermine or unfairly benefit from the success of others. The use of the phrase underscores the heated nature of the topic, one that the episode's writer Peter Saji admitted took five seasons to tackle properly.¹³

Of course, the fundamental enigma of mulattoes, past and present, is that they do not merely challenge ideals of blackness, they inherently do so with whiteness as well. Their relations vis-à-vis blacks have been well-documented, but their identity is inherently more complicated. They are not merely light-skinned blacks but also, if logic follows, dark-skinned whites. While this may sound odd, it is no less fallacious than the logic that governed mulattoes' existence for most of American history—that a white woman can give birth to a black child but a black woman cannot give birth to a white child, even if both children are ethnically the same. Terminology also illustrates past biases, as terms such as mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon indicate levels of black ancestry, yet there are not well-known terms for gradations of white ancestry. For example, there is no common term for people such as Malcolm X or Sasha and Malia Obama who are three-fourths black and one-fourth white.

Establishing some form of identity outside of hypodescent and one drop can seem like a Sisyphean task but is necessary if Americans are to move beyond the ideological strangleholds of the past. Ultimately, race is a social and cultural construct, and these ethnic distinctions were created by elites to navigate an uncertain future for a group of colonies that became a nation.

¹² “Black Like Us.” *blackish*. Directed by Salli Richardson-Whitfield. Written by Peter Saji. January 15, 2019.

¹³ Peter Saji, “Why the 'Black-ish' Colorism Episode Is So Terrifying (Guest Column).” *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 15, 2019.

Political scientist Henry Hale is one of the leading scholars on the topic of identity and has asserted that, “identity at its core is a means of reducing uncertainty, of making sense of the social world so as to survive and thrive.”¹⁴ Needless to say, this can be difficult for people of mixed black/white ancestry. Mariah Carey illustrated this problem in “Outside” when she said, “But in your heart/ Uncertainty forever lies/ And you’ll always be/ Somewhere on the outside.”¹⁵ As she said later in the song, those of mixed black/white ancestry are thrown into a “world divided” where uncertainty is rarely reduced but often heightened, and their own existence is perceived as a nebulous litmus test of either racial progress or regress.

The hierarchies that established mulattoes’ places in antebellum society are long destroyed, yet the fragments still remain in America’s racial psychosis. Like fingerprints, every mixed-race person with European and African ancestry has their own way of understanding this legacy and the way it has shaped them consciously and subconsciously. Today, they might identify as one monoracial race, black or white, while others claim to be both black *and* white. Some boldly challenge the racial hierarchies that continue to hamper the American republic, not wanting to risk being a William Ellison in a world that needs Denmark Vesey. Others tread more lightly, afraid to risk becoming disproportionately prominent and have their increased profile subconsciously repeat the colorism of the past. There is no one-size-fits-all approach for Americans of mixed black/white ancestry to solve racial division in either their country or their own identity. Whatever their approach may be, it must be cognizant of the hierarchies that once categorized their social positioning and seek to upend these prejudices, in order to create not

¹⁴ Henry Hale, *The Foundations of Ethnic Politics: Separatism of States and Nations in Eurasia and the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 35.

¹⁵ Mariah Carey, “Outside.” *Butterfly*, Columbia Records, 1997.

hierarchies, but opportunities—opportunities that affirm the humanity and equality of all people, regardless of skin color.

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